School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

A Project of Attention: Still Life and the Everyday

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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Abstract

This practice-led research project explores the affective dimension of contemporary western everyday life and the potential for the genre of still life painting to engage with and reflect the experience of it. Characterising the everyday as the overlooked, and locating it in the domestic bathroom, this research exists as and enacts a 'project of attention' that considers the objects and bodily engagements that take place in such a space, and the affects such engagements generate. The 'project of attention' is developed as a methodology and a working attitude that aims to avoid an evaluative critique of the everyday in favour of a position of attunement and immersion: a feeling for the affective texture and sensorial experience of the everyday. As such this research exists as both a project with its own findings and as an example of how creative, practice-led research might attend to the experience of the everyday, and the potential such attendance may hold.

Engaging with the genre of still life painting, considering its subject matter to be of the everyday and overlooked, and characterising the genre itself as being similarly undervalued and overlooked in an art-historical sense, this project seeks to develop new understandings of the genre, and to build a case for it as being able to critically and rigorously engage with contemporary life, and earnestly reflect the lived experience of the everyday. The painted works created as part of this research are positioned as contemporary iterations of this genre, and pay particular attention to the sensory and tactile nature of the everyday and the objects that inhabit it. As such, the works and this research engage with theories of sensory perception and explore the ability of a visual medium such as painting to approach the unseen, the felt. Ultimately, this research and its creative component aim to engender, and to offer, a newly attentive attitude to the everyday that allows for, and creates a space in which, the affective moments and textures of this area of life can come into view and be felt.

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Introduction

I spend a lot of time in the shower. It's a thinking space of sorts, where plans for the day ahead are formed, or where the events of the day just past are unpacked and sifted through. Thoughts, ideas, memories, cloud and rise like steam, while others slide away, and circle the drain. It's a space of preoccupation and distraction. Distracted actions take place there. I'm soaping, lathering, rinsing and wiping and I feel these goings-on, I'm an active participant in them, but my mind is elsewhere; I'm formulating responses to emails, revisiting snippets of conversation, scheduling time to walk the dog, buy groceries, finish paintings, remembering things I forgot to buy at the grocery store, wondering if the painting I've just finished is really finished and hearing the dog bark at the neighbours from the backyard. An interior conversation is taking place in my mind, while elsewhere, outside, my body falls into the habituated motions, the daily routine, of cleaning and self-maintenance. The everyday is an area of life left unattended, and overlooked, it hums along just fine on its own, by virtue of its habitual and repetitive nature, while attention is directed elsewhere, occupied with other matters, more important matters. It is felt though, on and through the body.

The texture of the everyday, of lived experience, is felt; it leaves impressions and traces, pulls on threads of past experiences, recalling and reforming sensory memories, generating affects. In the bathroom, the shower, I engage in a ritual of the everyday, reaching, grasping and touching automatically and out of habit. The things I'm reaching for and grasping; pumping, squeezing, flipping open, unscrewing, are the physical inhabitants of the everyday, the things, the objects, that are overlooked, by virtue of their status as unremarkable and commonplace, ordinary, and by virtue of the inattentive mode and area of life in which I engage with them. They persist however, or something of them persists; engagements with them generate affects, affective moments, however subtle or easily missed, that can offer insights and new understandings of our lived experience and mode of insertion in the world, should we deign to pay attention to them.

I consider this research to be a 'project of attention' (Sheringham 2013), and that I have conducted a project of attention in undertaking it. It is also, to borrow the words Kathleen Stewart uses to describe her own work *Ordinary Affects,* 'an experiment, not a judgement' (Stewart 2007, 1). Concerned with the everyday and the sensorial experience of it, my goal in this research is to enact, and to discover how to enact, an attitude and methodology of attention and immersion that aims not to pass judgement on this area of life, nor to rehabilitate it or give it new primacy, but rather to notice, to feel for, the affects generated there. In doing so, and in taking such a position, this research also seeks to investigate and discover the significance and potential, that the experience of the everyday, and the act of paying attention to such experiences, can hold. This research aims to exist as an example of a working methodology for enacting this kind of attunement in the fields of contemporary painting and the creative arts, as well as more generally offering the reader and viewer of this work a space in which, and an encouragment with which, to reconsider and re-orient their own faculties of attention.

Characterising the everyday and the things, the unremarkable objects that inhabit it, as the overlooked, and drawing a parallel with the genre of still life painting, as both overlooked in an art-historical sense, and taking such objects as its subject matter, this research is situated in the field of still life painting and as such it aims to investigate and build a case for the potential of still life painting as a contemporary art practice to reflect the modern, sensorial experience of the everyday. It also seeks to question the learned social and cultural heirarchies that make the everyday object, and the expereince of the everyday more generally, overlooked. In considering and critiquing traditional notions of the genre of still life it also seeks to develop new understandings of what a still life might be and mean. This research also aims to elucidate the ability of painting as a practice and visual medium to approach that which is felt rather than seen, and considers how such a practice can reflect the nature of sensory perception.

Engaging with contemporary works of cultural and social theory, by authors Daniel Miller and Matthew Crawford, in Chapter 1 this research first builds an argument for the study of everyday objects, by attributing to such objects and 'stuff' an integral and

irreducible role in both the development of culture and the shaping of lived experience. I then introduce theorist Maurizia Boscagli's work on everyday objects and materialism, noting, in particular, the emergence of theories of 'new materialisms' in the field of material studies which advocate for a dismantling of the subject-object opposition and urge a new consideration of the entanglements and relations between the two. The chapter closes with a discussion of author Leslie Jamison's *Empathy Exams*, building toward an alternate attitude towards objects that allows for greater consideration and attention.

In Chapter 2 I introduce the creative practice element of this research with a discussion of the first body of paintings, titled *Loyalty to the Thing*, I developed and exhibited as part of this project. I consider arts writer John Berger's notion of painting as 'an affirmation of the visible' (Berger 2001, 14) and his account of human vision and modes of looking in relation to the objects I chose to paint and, more generally, those that inhabit the everyday. I then relate Berger's words to art critic and theorist Norman Bryson's own 'worldly mode of seeing' (Bryson 1990, 65) building an understanding of a culturally developed and learned hierarchy of value, in which the genre of still life and its subject matter are considered less important, and so become the overlooked. I relate Bryson's theorisation of the still life genre to an exhibition of Australian still life works exhibited in Tarrawarra, Victoria, in 2007, and build a case for an understanding of the arena of the genre as a bodily and tactile one, and begin to question commonly accepted understandings of the genre. I introduce anthropologist and author Kathleen Stewart's writing on still life to further destabilise these common understandings, and offer new notions of what a still life might be. To this end, I argue that the works of contemporary painter Jude Rae should be considered as examples of still life paintings that can reflect the perceptual experience of objects and allow for the liveness, the vibrations and unsteadiness that can characterise such experiences.

In Chapter 3 I more closely explore sensory perception and experience through an analysis of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theorisation of phenomenology, bringing his work to bear on my own experiences and relating them

to the work of anthropologist and author C. Nadia Seremetakis. In doing so I introduce and develop an understanding of memory as a kind of sensory faculty in itself, and as an integral part of sensory perception and experience. I relate this idea to the works exhibited in *Loyalty to the Thing*, discussed in the previous chapter, and a further discussion of Bryson's theorisations of still life painting, as well as a more general discussion of painting's ability to make touch visible, with reference to the work of sociologist Mark Paterson. I return to Stewart's work *Ordinary Affects* and the concept of affect, specifically the affects generated in encounters with everyday objects, emerges as a key consideration for this research. Concluding with an analysis of still life works by contemporary painter Brad Lochore I consider how a painting might gesture towards these affects, reflecting on my own creative works and sensing a shift in focus of future works.

Chapter 4 opens with a discussion of the work exhibited in a subsequent exhibition and I reflect on the shift in focus that lead me to a greater consideration of object and body as situated in space. In giving more importance to and reflecting on the space the everyday objects I have painted inhabit, I allow for a greater sense of the physicality and materiality of the kinds of engagements I am concerned with, and introduce the idea of trace, with reference to the works of theorist Michael Sheringham, philosopher Roland Barthes and writer Georges Perec. Trace becomes something material and also immaterial, relating to movement, plasticity (plastic being the very material of the objects depicted in my creative work) and also memory, as I circle back to C. Nadia Seremetakis's work, but also cast it in a new light, alongside that of Norman Bryson, in considering the cultural historicity that can be encountered and sensed in objects and works of the everyday.

Chapter 5 introduces the works of Italian painter Giorgio Morandi as influences on this research and as examples of still life works that can reflect the understandings of sensory perception as developed in previous chapters, as well as the dynamic and affective nature of everyday objects and engagements. Building on this analysis of Morandi's work I return to the notion of stillness present in theorisations of the genre of still life painting and more explicitly challenge such understandings. The works of

Miller, Crawford, Stewart and Boscagli come back into view and theorist Rita Felski's work is introduced as a sympathetic voice. Felski advocates for a new kind of approach to the study of the everyday, one in which the ordinary is allowed to remain ordinary, a position this research aims to embody as it chooses to attend to moments of contact and affects generated in this area of life, rather than pursuing an evaluative critique of such experiences.

Chapter 6 opens with the introduction of theorist Maria Cichosz's paper "The Potential of Paying Attention: Tripping and the Ethics of Affective Attentiveness" (2014), and her development of the trip as a kind of methodology or framework with which to attend to the affective dimension of everyday life. Cichosz's paper leads to a more in-depth discussion of the term affect and how it might be understood, and also how it might be attended to. Cichosz references Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* in her paper and I align both writers' positions with my own in this research, as I advocate for a spirit of openness that suspends analytical thought long enough to allow forces and affects to be felt, that is, for an awareness of such affects to arise. In light of Cichosz's ideas and the discussion of Morandi's work in the previous chapter I reflect on a new body of creative work I developed and exhibited at Spectrum Project Space, titled *Within Touching Distance*, considering the curation and installation of the work and how this contributes to readings of it for the viewer. I pay particular attention to the small scale of the works, referencing other contemporary painters and commentary which suggests a movement toward the small and intimate in contemporary painting. This reflection brings Jude Rae's work back into frame, as I consider the experiences and feelings I find her work offers the viewer, and those that I hope my own work can offer. This leads to a more pointed analysis of particular works exhibited in the exhibition and greater clarity for myself in understanding how the creative practice element of this research has progressed, and the direction and painterly methods future works should take and more strongly engage with.

In the final and concluding chapter I return to the idea of attention, and consider the ethical potential of paying attention to the everyday. In doing so I also approach the potential significance of this research, the things it offers readers and viewers, and its

contribution to the fields of still life painting and creative practice research more generally. I discuss the 'crisis of attention' that theorist Michael Crawford (2015) finds modern living to be characterised by, and contrast his position with my own taken with this research. I discuss Michael Sheringham's concept of the 'project of attention' (Sheringham 2013), aligning it with the works by Kathleen Stewart and Maria Cichosz previously discussed and characterising my own research efforts as such a project. Through the analysis of Cichosz's work alongside that of professor Mark Freeman, I detect the ethical potential in the very act of paying attention to the affects the everyday can generate, and as such gesture toward the significance of finding frameworks and modes of being in which this attention can be enacted, contending also that experiencing an artwork, a painting, can provide this kind of experiential framework. I conclude this chapter, and this research, with a discussion of the final works created as part of this research, returning to Morandi, and placing my work alongside his, as a contemporary iteration of a genre that can claim to elucidate the lived, embodied experience of the modern everyday and its affects.

Chapter One: The Things that Fade from View

> Stuff has a quite remarkable capacity for fading from view, and becoming naturalized, taken for granted, the background or frame to our behaviour. Indeed stuff achieves its mastery of us precisely because we constantly fail to notice what it does. Things act much more commonly as analogous to the frames around paintings than as paintings themselves. (Miller 2010, 155)

When author and anthropology professor Daniel Miller writes of 'things' and 'stuff' he is writing about the material culture of everyday life – our clothing, our belongings, our homes - the objects we collect, and live with and in. He closes his 2010 publication *Stuff* with the summation of his own efforts in creating it: 'What this volume asks for is merely a consideration of things commensurate with the place they evidently have in our lives' (Miller 2010, 156). He recognises the tendency for academic research and study in the field of social sciences to aim towards a kind of reductionism, and hopes that the research he presents in *Stuff* avoids this in favour of seeking 'understanding' and 'insight,' ultimately developing a philosophical approach that can celebrate 'the quirky, the exuberant and the ridiculous in our passion for stuff' (Miller 2010, 154). Here I interpret Miller's approach to everyday material culture as being one that allows, and encourages, an enthusiastic immersion of oneself in the areas of life in which it is found. Avoiding a reductionist, boiling-down of findings, Miller opts instead to aim for a gentler and more generous consideration of stuff, and how we interact with it. He goes on to position his voice as hopefully replicating what he finds in Sir David Attenborough's: 'a rapture that seems to balance perfectly his awe at what can be explained and in what transcends explanation' (Miller 2010, 154). For Miller then, what is beyond explanation is as important as what is within its reach, and so, what is significant in his research is not solely its findings, but also the 'awe,' the attitude of attention, with which it is conducted.

According to Miller, the study of stuff is relevant because 'before we can make things, we are ourselves grown up and matured in the light of things that come down to us from the previous generations' (Miller 2010, 53). Referencing Pierre Bourdieu's

'theory of practice' as a key precedent to this line of thought, Miller describes it as giving weight to the idea that 'objects make people' (Miller 2010, 53). For Miller, and Bourdieu before him, it is the practice of everyday life, our consistent interaction with the material cultures of our lives, that ultimately leads us to assume the norms of our given culture, and so makes us the people we are (Miller 2010). Indeed, what Miller and Bourdieu suggest is that it is our material surrounds, the practices they necessitate, and the kind of internal order they establish, that provides us with our culture, and subsequently 'our second-nature, that which we habitually do without thought' (Miller 2010, 53). It becomes clear then, that the stuff of our lives is inextricably woven into the people we come to be, and in the study of it we can, and perhaps should, seek to become 'philosophers of objectification who dissolve oppositions of persons and things' (Miller 2010, 154). And it is this position that this research project seeks to consider and build upon, understanding the stuff and objects of everyday life as integral components of culture and lived experience, and as such, worthy of study and attention.

In *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction* (2015), author Matthew Crawford asks:

> What if the coherence of a life is in some significant way a function of *culture*? What if we are situated among our fellows in norms and practices that shape a life? In that case culture matters. That is, the environment matters, in a stronger way than one supposes if one adopts the interior, fully articulate model of rational agency, on the one hand, or the antimental, brain-centered view, on the other. (Crawford 2015, 23)

Here Crawford opens his book by questioning, like Miller, the opposition of persons and things, and suggests that the predominance of Enlightenment thought in the understanding of the self, its tendency to prize autonomy and mind over matter, may in fact fall short of understanding what it is to live, embodied in the world. More importantly, Crawford contends that an idealized life, the picture of human excellence that Enlightenment thought purported to provide, is not attained through the separation of self and environment, the achievement of autonomous thought over our physical surrounds, but rather 'through disciplined attention, in the kind of action

that joins us to the world' (Crawford 2015, 26). Crawford suggests that it is the sensation of finding ourselves 'situated' in the world that is fundamental to what a human being is, and this 'situatedness' comes about through 'bringing the self into a relation of fit to the external world' (Crawford 2015, 26).

Miller too, recognises the pattern of thought, inherited from the Age of Enlightenment and centuries of religious teachings before that, which sees transcendence achieved through the repudiation of the material:

> Enlightenment is tantamount to the separation from desire. When we look at ourselves today, we can see we have inherited much the same system of beliefs. The one thing we are never supposed to be is materialistic, because it is assumed that paying attention to the material is always at the expense of paying attention to the social, to the person. (Miller 2010, 77)

It is possible, however, in the writing of both Miller and Crawford, to find new conclusions, and to challenge this pervasive system of thought. As each author illustrates, a symbiotic relationship exists between person and thing: both create and influence the other, and so a contemporary enquiry that seeks to elucidate the lived experience of a person necessitates an attentiveness to the stuff that is 'part and parcel of our existence in the world.' (Miller 2010, 78) This idea of attentiveness is an attitude this research seeks to enact, and in Chapters 5 and 6 is explored in greater depth, and developed as a kind of methodology with which to consider and examine the ways in which we relate to and experience the objects that inhabit our world.

In *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014), author Maurizia Boscagli traces the history of theories of materialism, culminating in the emergence, in recent years, in a collection of 'new materialisms.' For Boscagli, what unites the theories collected under this term is that 'each of these theories presents versions of the material as unruly: they refuse to play by the rules that define materiality as passive matter' (Boscagli 2014, 3). Instead, each of them offers 'promising new versions of subject-object entanglements' (Boscagli 2014, 3). She cites Bruno Latour's notion of the 'quasi-subject quasi-object—that is, of a radically other (dis)order of things in

which friable subjects and mutable objects intervene in each other's being' as what is perhaps 'the pivotal idea of the new materialism' (Boscagli 2014, 3). For Boscagli, and the thinkers and theoreticians grouped under the banner of new materialism, what is essential to their research and thinking is, firstly, dismantling the subject-object opposition Miller and Crawford have already encountered, and instead allowing for new 'entanglements' between the two. Boscagli goes on to refer to Latour's 1993 publication *We Have Never Been Modern*, summarising Latour as suggesting 'the subject-object split has been naturalized by centuries of western science and philosophy, becoming the ground on which hierarchies of difference, built upon the rigid differentiation of an active authorizing subject controlling and manipulating inert matter, have multiplied' (Boscagli 2014, 19). It would seem that the task for new materialism, and new research in materialism now, is to re-configure and re-conceptualise the subject-object relationship, however, Boscagli warns against allowing this task to give preeminence to the object: 'The problem now is not to turn the relationship between subject and object on its head, or to recuperate the object and give it new primacy, but rather to reconfigure this relationship in terms of relationality and entanglements' (Boscagli 2014, 20).

Following Miller's work in *Stuff*, as previously discussed, it can be posited that humans are entangled with the material of their environment from the moment of birth—'objects make people' (Miller 2010, 53). Boscagli quotes Sarah Whatmore and Bruce Braun as noting: 'There is no moment in which humanity comes to be contaminated by technical objects and practices… because there can be no human without them. The history of the human animal—and indeed the history of culture—is thus necessarily the history of the stuff that is, from the beginning, part and parcel of human life' (Whatmore and Braun in Boscagli 2014, 21). What we must decide then, in order to reconfigure the subject-object relationship, is how and where we look for these entanglements. For Boscagli, 'the time has come to study this new, plastic materiality in the sphere of the everyday and as a part of the contemporary culture of capital, where artefactual matter never ceases to be a commodity' (Boscagli 2014, 2). Stuff, as Boscagli uses the term, refers to 'those things which we own, but which have shed their glamour as shiny commodities, yet which we are unwilling to

dispose of' (Boscagli 2014, 2). In much the same vein as Miller, Boscagli's stuff is comprised of the material matter we encounter in everyday life, the things we own and live with, that 'while never ceasing to be commodified' are 'always on the verge of becoming valueless' (Boscagli 2014, 2). For Boscagli it is this instability, and volatility, in the material of the everyday that makes it so pertinent to new materialism's line of enquiry. Stuff of the everyday does not stand still, its value is never fixed, it is at once meaningful and meaningless, and 'it implies scenarios in which material stuff and human subject make contact in ways that are intensely intimate, somatic, and unpredictable' (Boscagli 2014, 3). In this way, stuff, as it exists in the everyday, is resistant to the accepted 'order of things' that centuries of western science, philosophy and semiotics have established, and so is an appropriate area in which to develop a similarly resistant conception of subject-object relations. The everyday is the area in which my own line of enquiry, this research project, is situated, and following Miller, Crawford and Boscagli, this research takes it as an appropriate area of lived experience to examine and engage with, in order to both challenge the commonly accepted subject object divide and, accordingly, to develop new understandings of how we experience and relate to objects.

In the conclusion to *Stuff*, Miller describes his anthropological method as 'ethnographic involvement intended to lead to empathy' (Miller 2010, 156). However, he writes, what began as a desire to empathise with people has also resulted in an empathetic response to things themselves:

> To feel rather sorry for the way ordinary stuff has been neglected and pushed to one side… and the way things are constantly humiliated as the mere symbolic representation of persons and society. Because denigrating material things, and pushing them down, is one of the main ways we raise ourselves up onto apparent pedestals. (Miller 2010, 156)

Again, the system of beliefs in which material things are vilified in the pursuit of elevating humanity is restated, however, Miller is unflinching in his assertion that 'we will not be helped by either a theory of stuff, or an attitude to stuff, that simply tries to oppose ourselves to it; as though the more we think of things as alien, the more we

keep ourselves sacrosanct and pure' (Miller 2010, 5). It follows then, in light of Miller's and Crawford's work, that what *would* help, is an abandonment of this tendency towards opposition, and a move towards an attitude of attention, and empathy.

In her 2014 collection of essays *Empathy Exams*, Leslie Jamison writes, 'empathy isn't just something that happens to us—a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain—it's also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves. It's made of exertion…' (Jamison 2014, 23). In the paragraph above, I noted that Miller made this kind of choice in his research; he exerted effort in paying attention to people and things, and in so doing, developed an empathetic response toward both. Empathy is traditionally understood as identifying with, or relating to, the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of another, in short, the act of attempting to feel the way another feels. To develop an empathetic response to things, then, may seem a strange or impossible task, as it would suggest that things, inanimate objects, have thoughts and feelings of their own. Against this view, I wish to suggest that the practice of empathy can be employed in a different way towards a different result. Before we can feel how another feels, we first make the decision to feel for that other—we place value on this other, and so decide to pay attention to it, extending our own precious energy in the consideration of it. Perhaps, then, to feel empathy for things does not necessarily entail attributing distinct feelings and thoughts to it—it is not necessary to personify it—but to instead allow for a consideration of it that places it alongside humanity in the hierarchy of value. In this way empathy can be a choice, an act of attention and consideration, an attitude. The following chapter opens with a discussion of the first body of creative work developed in this mode of thinking and as part of this research, which situates this research more specifically in the domestic bathroom. I consider habits of vision and modes of seeing that contribute to an understanding of the everyday as the overlooked, and examine still life painting as a genre traditionally concerned with the everyday, and the ability of painting, as a visual medium, to reflect the experience of this area of life.

Chapter Two: Loyalty to the Thing

I have not used all of these things. Some were purchased on the strength of the bottle alone—their outward appearance—and so their contents have gone unused. I have not opened the cap to smell what's inside, have not applied to my skin, with or without water, the contents of their little bodies. Denying their intended use, I instead collect them on my desk. Arranged, I suppose, for ease of viewing and selection, the taller at the back, like colours clustered together.

Perhaps it is a contradiction to place those I have not known—to paint them—alongside those who have spent their short lifetimes with me, in my bathroom, waiting and watching from the tiled ledge alongside the shower, the cheap, wooden vanity, or the faded, yolk-yellow sink. I have touched *these* objects, daily. And I know them, not to recall a crisp rendition of their appearance in my mind's eye, but to touch them, to perform the automatic, lived-in actions their use requires when they again enter my grasp. I couldn't tell you the kind of pressure it requires to squeeze the dwindling contents from this bottle, or how many fingers I place on the lid of this one when I click the cap open. I couldn't tell you, because those things are not recorded as thoughts—not readily available as words—and yet I *know* them.

So I am painting these things. Painting pictures of the way these things look, and trying to paint pictures of the way they feel. And perhaps it is ok that I have not repeatedly handled and used every one of these objects, that some have left the shelf at Coles only to find the desk in my studio. Certainly, all of these objects have had a life of material creation and handling before they even reach the shop, let alone my home. And so, perhaps I know none of them as completely as is possible—they have a history that predates my presence—but perhaps there is another kind of history, a lineage of form, that allows me to suggest that I do know all of them. I have known their predecessors, the generations that have come before them. Their grainy-matte finishes, sharp plastic edges, ribbed caps; each sensation is accumulated and collected, in and on my body, falling into a kind of continuum of touch in which each one echoes the last and betrays the next. This is *what* I know. And *how* I know it. (Crocker 2016a)

In the solo exhibition *Loyalty to the Thing*, held at Free Range Gallery in July 2016, each work was allowed to breathe: negative space surrounded them. In conventional art discourse negative space connotes an absence, it is used to describe that which is not the subject of focus, the silent, passive space from which the subject of the work draws outwards, emerges. Negative space is blank, empty, yet to be populated, receding out of view and time, it offers no story, except to say: 'this is what comes before, the subject has yet to arrive.' What happens, then, if it's allowed to remain? A room, a gallery, empty save for 5 small paintings, the size of A4 pages, hung—traced—across its perimeter (Figure 2.1). This room heaves with emptiness, although it is caught perhaps, not drawing in, but rather exhaling, and so there is no urgency, no decrease in pressure or rush of air sucking in. Instead a gentle release, and the momentary stillness that always follows. Perhaps this room is not so empty then? Or, to consider it differently, perhaps to be empty does not mean to be lacking, but rather allowing, and to experience it is not to be denied content, but to consider, to breathe and pause, in the spaces between it.

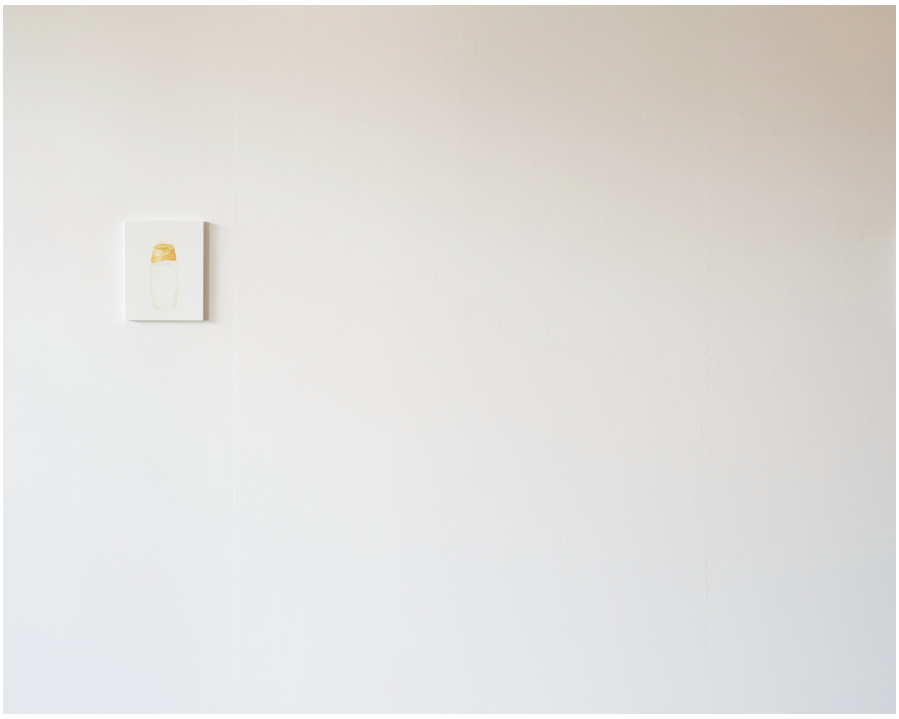

Figure 2.1 Mardi Crocker, *Milk and Honey* (installation view), 2016. Photograph by the artist.

The subjects of these paintings, delicately rendered bottles, stand silently within their own perimeters of negative space. As our focus draws in on each work the quiet stillness of the room also collects within its borders. It collects and seeps out, or rather, co-mingles. Save for the 2cm drop from one white painted surface to another, and the narrow shadows that hug the edges of each painting, there is very little to differentiate one negative space from another. The space within each painting then, becomes a continuation of the one in the room, and again we are allowed, encouraged, to breathe and find pause.

Figure 2.2 Mardi Crocker, *Milk and Honey*, 2016. Photograph by the artist

Alighting upon the subject of the painting, finding the object rendered on its surface, moments of specificity appear to meet those of ambiguity. Moments of solidity, of rendered certainty, meet areas that threaten to disappear altogether, to evaporate into the space that surrounds them. The objects depicted, an assortment of bottles, have been stroked—wiped—into existence with paint, however when these actions become visible, when the frequency of marks diminishes and they begin to stand alone, the illusion dissipates. The objects then, stand somewhere between existence and disappearance, visible, tangible, and yet ready to fall back into the silent stillness that surrounds. This disappearance is twofold, and what is at stake is not only their coherence as discrete objects, but also their existence as visible ones.

> Painting is, first, an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually disappears. Without the disappearing, there would perhaps be no impulse to paint, for then the visible itself would possess the surety (the permanence) which painting strives to find. More directly than any other art, painting is an affirmation of the existent, of the physical world into which mankind has been thrown. (Berger 2001, 14)

In considering Berger's account of the visible and its disappearance, I reflect on the amount of time it might take something to disappear. In contemplating the disappearance of a physical object, its movement from existent to non-existent, we might take in to account the use and lifetime of that object, from the moment of its creation to that of its destruction. In *Evocative Objects* (2007), editor Sherry Turkle quotes Igor Kopytoff:

> In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: …Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (Kopytoff in Turkle 2007, 152)

Kopytoff's words, the idea of an object's life, are helpful in framing Berger's disappearance of the visible, in that they ascribe a timeframe to it. With Kopytoff's thinking an object or thing inhabits and experiences time, and so is placed in a position of relation to us as human beings. Here, the thing's period of existence, its lifespan, can be placed and measured alongside our own, and as surely as we are aware of our own eventual disappearance we become aware of theirs. This kind of disappearance speaks to a broad ideation of things existing in the world, and their eventual and inevitable demise—however, in returning to Berger's account, I find that there is another event of disappearance, or perhaps a succession of infinitesimal events, that precedes this grand and final one, and which is of the most pertinence to this research.

In the discussion of painting quoted earlier Berger describes the disappearance of the visible as the impulse for an artist to paint, which necessarily suggests that the thing disappeared must first appear, and be seen, before it disappears. It follows, then, that Berger's disappearance is a disappearance from view; the thing once seen is no longer in view. This would certainly be the case in the event that something has met its demise, and no longer exists, however, perhaps it is also possible for a thing or object to exist but also disappear. In the sense that some *thing,* a view of a landscape out of a window, or a bottle of handcream on a nightstand, can be present but also out of mind and sight. As such it exists in the world, but is disappeared to you or I when we fail to see and conceive of it.

In the seminal work *Ways of Seeing* (2008), Berger addresses looking: 'We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are' (Berger 2008, 9). As I attempt to bring this account of vision to bear on my own experience I imagine the way I move through the rooms of my house, or how I might traverse a shopping centre. I feel the frenetic movement and pace my eyes must set, continually scanning and collecting information, so that I may safely and effectively complete my journey and its accompanying tasks, however minor they may be. I then wonder at the

number of things I saw on that journey that now escape me, that went unremarked upon, unrecorded; the glimpses, imageric fragments, always evaporating and never held long enough to solidify. These are the innumerable infinitesimal events of disappearance that occur in everyday life, in everyday vision, and they are not the result of an end to, or an absence of, a visible thing, but rather perhaps, of a conditioned mode of seeing.

In *Looking at The Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (1990), author Norman Bryson describes a 'worldly mode of seeing' in which 'sight is ensnared in the world, caught in pathways it cannot get out of, following tracks laid down in advance by the world's show' (Bryson 1990, 65). Operating in this mode, we learn and come to know what is worth looking at, to identify the world's 'show': those things which should be savoured and attended to, *seen*, and as a consequence what can be discarded and passed over. According to Bryson we have adapted an evaluative system with which to 'scotomise the visual field' and 'not *see*, but scan' (Bryson 1990, 65), and what we do see, the content we do allow ourselves to pause and consider, is not so much an individual decision as a habituated reflex. This, for Bryson, is vision's 'worldly education—both the eye's enslavement to the world's ideas of what is worthy of attention, and the eye's sloth, the blurs and entropies of vision that screen out everything in creation except what the world presents as spectacular' (Bryson 1990, 64). As such, our faculty of vision has been conditioned, perhaps even co-opted, by a culturally determined hierarchy of value.

Bryson approaches this hierarchy of value through an analysis of art history, noting the historical dominance of, and the higher value attributed to, the genres of painting in which a human presence or narrative is the primary focus. These 'higher' genres, as Bryson calls them, 'address the part of our imagination which builds and affirms the sense of human visual identity' (Bryson 1990, 60). Essentially, when portraiture, 'history painting' and even landscape painting depict the human subject or hint at a human presence they construct and assert 'human beings as the primary focus of depiction' affirming the 'centrality, value and prestige of the human subject' (Bryson 1990, 60). Here the dominant, 'higher' forms of artistic depiction cement humanity's

position as the most worthy author and subject. This tendency to privilege the human over all else, to take most seriously and give the most importance to the human, is a cultural and ideological one, reflected in art history, but detectable in so many other areas of life. As discussed in Chapter 1, in *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* author Maurizia Boscagli detects a historical 'western philosophic, scientific, and semiotic order of things' in which humanity is subject and stuff (the non-human) 'the eternal sidekick' (Boscagli 2014, 3). And in applying this implicit order of things, this hierarchy, to Bryson's 'worldly education' we can determine that the 'world's ideas of what is worthy of attention' are distinctly anthropocentric, and that which is not *of* or *about* humanity is consequently unworthy.

Following Bryson's thinking a clearer idea of the things that disappear, and the reasons why they might do so, can be developed, and it subsequently makes sense that the objects depicted in the works in *Loyalty to the Thing* threaten to disappear too. They don't affirm human achievement or individuality, and don't speak to a human presence or narrative. They are, instead, the passed over and the overlooked, the sidekicks. An assortment of plastic bottles, reached for out of habit and creatural necessity, used but barely considered, they threaten to disappear because they are not *seen* to begin with. Perhaps there is also another reason why these particular objects may be overlooked, unseen in the sense that I have been talking about here, aside from the value, or lack thereof, that our worldly vision ascribes to them. Perhaps our bodily relationship with them, the very way we interact with them, also influences the ways we do and do not look at them.

The objects depicted in this body of work are touched, daily, perhaps even multiple times a day. But how to characterise this kind of touch? I would suggest it is a distracted one, a pre-occupied one. Having gathered just enough visual information to determine where in relation to our body this object lies, a habitual action of reaching, squeezing, pulling and pushing takes over. The role of sight, of determined looking, takes a back seat in this kind of action, which takes place in close proximity to the body. These objects, because of their nature and purpose, inhabit a bodily, tactile space which, as Bryson suggests is constructed by gestures 'with only partial reference

to the eye: gestures, which depend on repetition and routine, can operate without constant monitoring, and for this reason theirs is the preterite domain of the "overlooked" ' (Bryson 1990, 73). These objects then, can be overlooked because they inhabit a bodily space in which the information we gather and mode of processing is tactile more so than visual. It is, according to Bryson, a 'profoundly unvisual' space (Bryson 1990, 70). Why then, and moreover how, would a painter choose to attend to the inhabitants of such a space in a profoundly visual medium?

For Bryson, 'tactile space is generally in constant movement: things are moved about, jammed together, lifted and carried informally, and the concept of motionless composition is entirely alien to it' (Bryson 1990, 74-75). This discussion of space is part of Bryson's analysis of still life painting, and in particular the works of 17th Century painters Francisco de Zurbarán and Juan Sánchez Cotán. Bryson detects, in the works of both painters, a spiritual ambition to resurrect fallen vision, even to correct it, and absolve the eye of worldly values. He suggests they attempt this by removing from their compositions 'the sense of tactile familiarity' in order to 'present the eye with heightened, defamiliarised forms' (Bryson 1990, 77). The shadowy realm of the overlooked is flooded with light; carefully, often mathematically arranged compositions, rendered in precise detail sit motionless before us, out of reach, familiar, and yet deeply unfamiliar. In this way the overlooked inhabitants of our bodily space are brought into focus, are seen, however it would seem to be at the denial of the primary sense with which we know them. If, as Bryson says, Cotán and Zurburán 'drive a wedge between the tactile and the visual, and thereby estrange what is familiar and everyday' (Bryson 1990, 79); in order to present the overlooked anew, their works essentially elevate it out of that category, and so deny its defining trait. Perhaps it would be more faithful to the object, to our experience of and relation to it as overlooked, to allow it to remain unsteady, felt rather than seen, liable to move or disappear.

In the catalogue essay for the exhibition *Snap Freeze: Still Life Now*, held at TarraWarra Museum of Art, Victoria, from May to November 2007, curator Jenna Blyth describes the criteria with which the exhibited works were selected: 'Works

selected could show no presence of the human form' (Blyth 2007, 7). Here she references painting's hierarchy of genre, as discussed by Bryson, in which the depiction of the human occupied the highest rung, and still life's disavowal of the subject meant it occupied the lowest. A further criterion, she writes, was that 'works selected could not suggest movement, they must convey the sense of an 'instant', a moment in time' (Blyth 2007, 7). A 'frozen moment in Australian still life practice' (Blyth 2007, 6), the exhibition presents a selection of artworks produced from 2000 to 2007, in an effort to explore contemporary still life practice in this country. Blyth's criteria present us with the essential characteristics an artwork must have in order to assume a place in the field of contemporary still life, and again we encounter the motionless composition Bryson suggests is so alien to the very spaces in which the content of a work of still life can be encountered. Blyth identifies the prevailing categories, or themes, in contemporary still life practice as being death, *vanitas*, table arrangements, familiar objects, food, flowers and flora, and as I move through the catalogue, surveying the 36 artworks reproduced within, I consider that they all inhabit (whether natively or through pictorial arrangement and material making) the kind of bodily, tactile space that is characterised by distracted glances and repetitive gesture. Most works, even those that grapple with death and *vanitas*, and so would presumably lift their gaze above the overlooked and the everyday, engage with an intimacy of view and space, a pictorial proximity to the viewer, that necessarily pulls their contents into a bodily orbit. In making this argument I do not wish to denounce still life's preoccupation with the moment, and with stillness, but rather to suggest that a moment need not necessarily be frozen, or taken to be static, and that a creative encounter with the overlooked might take the form of an attunement to the energetic capacities of the space it inhabits.

> A still life is a static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance. A quivering in the stability of a category or trajectory, it gives the ordinary the charge of unfolding. It is the intensity born of a momentary suspension of narrative, or a glitch in the projects we call things like the self, agency, home, a life.
> (Stewart 2007, 19)

With this passage anthropologist and author Kathleen Stewart imagines what a still life might be: what a moment of stillness in everyday life might consist of, what its qualities might be. These moments, for Stewart, are still, but perhaps barely. A charge runs through them and accumulates, in this momentary stopping, which is merely a pause before the affect. She writes, 'a still life is a genre that captures the liveness of inanimate objects (fruit, flowers, bowls) by suspending their sensory beauty in an intimate scene charged with the textures of paint and desire' (Stewart 2007, 19). In still life as both painting and experience Stewart finds a potent charge, a kind of latent energy humming silently below the surface, poised to erupt when the stillness evaporates. What a still life can offer us then, is a moment of pause, a brief cessation in the general running of things, pockets of time in which the hum of daily life may come into view, become realised, and even redirected. A still life, or a moment of still life, vibrates with possibility:

> It can come as a shock or as some kind of wake-up call. Or it can be a scene of sheer pleasure—an unnamed condensation of thought and feeling… Or it can be a flight from numbing routine and all the self-destructive strategies of carrying on. (Stewart 2007, 19)

A still life offers us a momentary emancipation from the usual, or more precisely, from the usual modes of being, and its energy is a transformative one. However, although it arises from the ordinary, the everyday, this transformative power does not fold back in on itself, and so rob the ordinary of its essential trait, as Bryson's 17th Century painters would have it. Rather, as Stewart writes: 'It can turn the self into a dreaming scene, if only for a minute' (Stewart 2007, 19), and so its transformative effects are felt, not at the site from which it arises, but in our selves as witnesses to and active participants within it.

In the monograph devoted to contemporary painter Jude Rae's still lifes, author Justin Paton writes: 'Everywhere in the paintings, Rae seeks ways to acknowledge that what we know of the object exceeds what we see of it; that we are never, in fact, "just looking" ' (Paton 2006, 24 - 25). We are never 'just looking,' as Paton puts it, because

we are always actively participating, collaborating in their making. Rae's objects are both apparent and elusive, fraying at the edges, vibrating and threatening to undo themselves, through deliberately placed blurs and exposures of the mechanics of its painterly construction. What at first might seem to be a decidedly still painting, and to borrow Paton's analogy, a document that can be filed away and requires no further attention, instead becomes an event that requires a witness (Paton 2006). A witness to be immersed in, and attuned to its affects, a final landing place or site in which these affects can be enacted and felt. For Paton 'these paintings quietly insist that objects are inseparable from their effects,' and 'attending to objects means attending to their changeable presence in light, space and time' (Paton 2006, 42). To attend to an object, then, as an artist or viewer, means to observe and be receptive to the ways in which it can move, change, escape or transform, and all of which takes place not on the pictorial plane before us, but in our perception.

Although it may be popularly understood that a work of still life must avoid the human subject and form if it wishes to name itself as such, it would seem that it is perhaps not such a simple, or indeed necessary task, to separate the subject and object. If I agree with Bryson's assertions that still life's primary subject is the overlooked, and its realm is a bodily and tactile one, I can also assert that these conditions can only arise out of a relation to the person. These conditions presuppose the presence of human vision and the human body. Arguably a work of still life is also made with the purpose of returning to those sites of visual and bodily encounter, which are also the sites of its significance, and where its effects are felt. Of a particular series of Jude Rae's still lifes Justin Paton finds that 'What matters here is not the 'meaning' of the objects but their movements, and the close attention they demand… Rae shifts still life from an art of possession to one of perception' (Paton 2006, 44). In this way, Rae's still lifes extend beyond the potential symbolism that can be read in so many of the works in this genre—not to suggest that this can ever be wholly evaded—but rather that the larger question becomes, not *what* they are, but *how* they are, and as a consequence, how we perceive them.

The works in *Loyalty to the Thing* attempted to heed these findings, or perhaps nudged me in the direction of them. After the show they returned to my studio, and stood, leant, silently behind me as I wrote. I turned around occasionally, as if I was looking to see what had changed. Changed not on the surfaces, in the images rendered, but in my perception of them. A few thousand words in, I turned around in case there were new realisations to be found. My thoughts had progressed and so a new communion of them and the works might offer me a new or different result. Or to put it another way, there is perhaps nothing so final as a result, and so what I was really doing was looking and looking again, and feeling for shifts, different effects. I was also looking because I couldn't remember, or didn't trust that I remembered with accuracy, exactly how they appear. How strange that I had spent hours with them, concentrated my energy and movements into their construction, and am left with a mere impression. Or perhaps it is not strange at all, because, when the detailed shapes I attempt to recall dissolve into blurred marks and fields of colour, what remains is the sensation of creating them. I pulled these objects from a 'half-lit place of blurs and glimpses' (Bryson 1990, 64) in order to paint them, but enacting this attention has not fortified their appearance, for myself or the viewer; it has instead initiated a recollection of experiences felt, with and on the body. My experience departs from that of the viewers' when my tactile engagement with the practice of painting, the physical mechanics of it, begins to mingle with the source of its inspiration, but what the viewers find, what the pictures reach for, and summon, is a prior sensory knowledge of the objects pictured, and others like them.

Returning to Berger's disappearances, and my understanding of them, I find that to actively picture them, or more specifically, to picture the things that disappear, does not mean to fix them, in the mind's eye of myself or the viewer. Having paid close attention to their appearance in order to visually describe them I have not provided myself, nor the viewer of the resulting works in the exhibition, with a concrete record of their visible attributes. Instead, the pictures act as references to past, embodied experiences, of viewer and artist alike, and invite a remembrance of the sensations that characterise such experiences. In this way these paintings of objects can claim to speak of more than the appearance of them, because this appearance is not an end, it is not

isolated information that reaches our brain only to sit apart from all other knowledge. It coalesces with and seeps in and out of other sensorial fragments to build concepts, ideas and understandings of an embodied life in a physical world.

And so, asking myself again, more pointedly, why describe the inhabitants of a 'profoundly unvisual space,' as Bryson puts it, with a profoundly visual medium, I might respond with another question: when does looking not involve the body? And when I receive visual information what does it do, and what does it tell me? It tells me 'this is here' and 'you are here,' and so I am brought into a relation of fit with the world, which is necessarily embodied. Berger writes, 'painting is an affirmation of the existent, of the physical world into which mankind has been thrown' (Berger 2001, 14). And so, to visually describe the physical world, and in the case of this research, the overlooked, is not to assert vision as the primary and only faculty for attending to it, but rather, to find an entry point to the body, and to invite one sensation to recall another.

Chapter Three: Our Mode of Insertion in the World

In the seminal text *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), originally published in 1945, celebrated French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes: 'there is not in the normal subject a tactile experience and also a visual one, but an integrated experience to which it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each sense' (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 137). According to Merleau-Ponty's influential theorisation of perception, in ordinary sense perception the subject does not experience, or sense the world, through delineated sensory modes: 'I do not translate the "data of touch" into the language of seeing or *vice versa*—I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body, itself' (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 173). And in *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception* (2011), author Komarine Romdenh-Romluc concludes that 'the senses are not discrete modes of experiencing the world', but instead, 'are integrated with, and transform one another, so that we should think of them as internally related components of a unified perceptual system' (Romdenh-Romluc 2011, 67-68). For Merleau-Ponty different sensory modes are not experienced independently of one another, gathering different information, and resulting in discrete experiences, so that, for example, an encounter with an object might generate both a visual experience and a tactile experience. Rather the sensory information is collected in one experience of the object, which holds various sensory properties. This is further evidenced by the following quote from Merleau-Ponty in which each sense is shown to present the subject with properties not inherent to its own mode:

> One sees the weight of a block of cast iron which sinks in the sand, the fluidity of water and the viscosity of syrup. In the same way I hear the hardness and unevenness of cobbles in the sounds of a car, and we speak appropriately of a 'soft', 'dull' or 'sharp' sound. (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 267)

This, for Merleau-Ponty, is the nature of ordinary sense experience, and serves to exemplify his conception of a unified perceptual system, in which sensory modes are internally related. As such, this theorisation of sensory perception also serves to

elucidate the ability of a visual format such as painting, to speak of and elicit other sensory information.

Accepting Merleau-Ponty's theorisation that the senses, in the process of perception, act together, or are indistinguishable, and that one sensory mode can claim to recall another, I consider the kinds of memory and prior knowledge that would make this possible. When Merleau-Ponty detects, with his eyes, the weight of cast iron, or the fluidity of water, one sense is, in effect, reporting on another, and I would suggest that it is prior experiences that make this possible. Merleau-Ponty is able to ascribe, through visual apprehension, tactile or spatial properties to an object, because experiences of those properties have already been processed and learned from. Applying this thinking to my own environment, I glance out of my study window, and see the yellow dish-cloth hanging on the clothesline outside. I see, and describe it as being, fluffy, porous and light. The patternation of shadows across its surface show me its minutely varied surface. There are brief moments in which the sunlight seems to shine through and illuminate it, and it is easily caught by the wind. These observations however, are not enough to conclude that the object I see is undoubtedly fluffy, porous and light. It is possible for a harder material or plastic to exhibit this kind of surface and transparency without being fluffy or porous, and perhaps the wind is particularly strong today, so that even a heavy object could be easily blown about and made to look light. I am, however, convinced of these tactile properties, provided to me by sight, because I have experienced them before, and remember them—not as discrete memories of particular like objects, but as general remembrances of tactile sensations, a form of bodily knowledge. I am therefore able to suggest and believe that this object is fluffy, porous and light, because my perception is informed as much by what is immediately available, the properties I see out my window, as by those already experienced, and stored, memorised, by my body.

In the essay "Memory of the Senses, Part II: Still Acts" (1994b), anthropologist and author C. Nadia Seremetakis suggests:

> The memory of one sense is stored in another: that of tactility in sound, of hearing in taste, of sight in sound. Sensory memory is a form of storage… The awakening of the senses is awakening the capacity for memory, of tangible memory; to be awake is to remember, and one remembers through the senses, via substance. (Seremetakis 1994b, 28)

Seremetakis finds, like Merleau-Ponty, the inter-modality of the senses, as well as the role of sensory memory in perception and experience. To experience something sensorially is to be ready to commit its sensations to memory, and such memories are then recalled through the next act of sensing. In this way memory and the senses form a symbiotic relationship integral to perception: memories are formed through sensorial experience, and sensorial experience in turn allows these recorded sensations, these memories, to be revisited and re-sensed, in the continuum of sensorial experience. Of this relationship Seremetakis writes:

> Memory as a distinct meta-sense transports, bridges and crosses all the other senses. Yet memory is internal to each sense, and the senses are as divisible and indivisible from each other as each memory is separable and intertwined with others. Memory is the horizon of sensory experiences, storing and restoring the experience of each sensory dimension in another, as well as dispersing and finding sensory records outside the body in a surround of entangling objects and places. (Seremetakis 1994a, 9)

Memory seems to be a kind of free radical, at once a conduit for the senses, and a sense in itself, constantly arranging and re-arranging sensory data, making new connections and dismantling others. It would seem also that it is an impossible, indeed unnecessary task, to attempt to isolate one from the other, memory from the senses, and their roles in sensory perception. Instead, this research finds, as its point of interest, the coalescence of the two, the site at which this coalescing takes place, the body, and the propensity for this sensory memory to be engaged by and reflected in, painting.

In each of the five paintings shown in *Loyalty to the Thing* the object depicted appears to stand to attention: facing the viewer, ready to be used, or having just been used. 'Facing'—not to suggest that objects like these have faces, have eyes with which to meet our own, but in the way that such objects have a back and a front: an inoperative side, and an active side. In deliberately positioning and rendering them to display this active side, I display them as willing participants, ready to return to the tactile, bodily space of the viewer through gestures of use. As such the painted objects reach out, and, unhindered by a background which might seek to pull them back into the picture plane, or ascribe them to a particular space or time, they push forward as if to re-enter the viewer's grasp, then and there, to become active again. Returning and re-entering become key terms and ideas, as it is prior bodily knowledge and sensory memory that both shape the viewer's perception of them and form the mode of perception they wish to engage with and reflect upon. As such I am inserting these paintings into a kind of sensory loop, in which they are positioned as both initiators and recipients of this kind of sense perception. In this way the depicted objects point not only to their real-life counterparts, but also to the bodily affects both the material object and its painted reflection can generate.

In *Looking at the Overlooked*, Bryson discusses Caravaggio's still life *Basket of Fruit*: 'The *Basket of Fruit* does not recede: it projects. And as it does so, it announces that the only space where the objects reside is in this projection that is sent out from the canvas towards the spectator' (Bryson 1990, 80). This characterisation of Caravaggio's still life is used by Bryson to illustrate the artist's break from a mode of transcription to one of inscription. For Bryson, instead of reflecting or representing an already existing scene, acting as an illusion, or window to reality, Caravaggio presents a new, original world that exists only on this canvas, and in the space between work and viewer. In doing so Caravaggio lifts the still life from the position of humble reflector of the already existent, designed to disappear in service of its content, to one of authorship and agency, allowing the art to 'display *itself*' (Bryson 1990, 81). As such, the artwork becomes less a record to be observed and more an active participant in its own record-making, pulling the viewer into its space, while also extending out into the viewer's: asking them to participate in the construction of its meaning. What I

also infer from Bryson's analysis is the existence of a kind of contact point between artwork and viewer. As Bryson notes: 'Instead of receding, objects come forward, as though the vanishing-point were not 'behind' the canvas, on some internal horizon, but in front of it, in the space where the viewer stands' (Bryson 1990, 80). In describing the objects in my own paintings as pushing forward, and reaching out, I imagine and characterise the space between viewer and painting as a potent and tactile one. The objects reach out, are within reach, and elicit the same kind of imagined action from the viewer—or rather, they elicit sensorial memories of such actions.

In *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (2007), author Mark Paterson writes that there are three ways in which touch can be sensed in the pictorial surface of a painting:

> First… the brush stroke is a mark, evidence of the manual touch of the painter; secondly it is also the touch of the paint mark as a visible form… Thirdly, both the painter's and the viewer's experience of the painting is touching, affective. In between the viewer and the painter, the touch marks or brushstrokes on the canvas are a physical point of translation of sensation, of affect. (Paterson 2007, 88)

Paterson's first and second points account for painting's ability to literally make touch visible, however it is the resulting effect—the translation of visual information to felt sensation—that is of most interest to myself and this research. As Paterson suggests, to picture our physical experience of the world 'is not simply a matter of the visualization of tactility, nor a simple evocation of the tactile in the visible world through the artwork' (Paterson 2007, 89). It is not enough to simply record how things appear, and to rely on the mechanics of a painting's construction—its visible marks and the painter's tactile engagement—to truly reflect an embodied experience of the world. This would be, perhaps, to go only skin deep, to graze the surface of things, whereas Paterson suggests that 'the painter must make "visible" a whole realm of experience' (Paterson 2007, 89) achieved, in Merleau-Ponty's words, by 'breaking the "skin of things" to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world' (Mearleau-Ponty in Paterson 2007, 89). What the painter must do then, is reflect 'our mode of insertion in the world' (Paterson 2007, 90), and make visible not

only the materiality of the world around us, but also our embodied perception and experience of it, making visible, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari suggest in *What is Philosophy*: 'the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 182). In heeding these ideas and applying them to the realm of this project, the task of my research becomes one of picturing the forces, sensations and affects generated by an immersion in the everyday, and more specifically, by an engagement with the objects that populate it.

In the conclusion of *Ordinary Affects* Kathleen Stewart writes: 'This book is about how moving forces are immanent in scenes, subjects, and encounters, or in blocked opportunities or the banality of built environments' (Stewart 2007, 128). The book is the product of Stewart's own immersion in, and attunement to, the forces and affects of the ordinary, the everyday, and what is key for me, or what is a recurring sensation for me as I read the book, is a sense of movement, and the understanding of forces and affects as live and dynamic:

> Ordinary affect is a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact. It's transpersonal or prepersonal—not about one person's feelings becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water (Stewart 2007, 128)

Forces and affects are kinetic and are born of things, 'bodies,' moving, meeting and coming into contact. Stewart's 'bodies' implies and allows things edges, borders (however permeable), so that we can conceive of them as sovereign forms that may then meet, and in the case of this research the bodies meeting are that of the human subject and the object.

Relating Stewart's thinking to my research, I consider that to picture the embodied perception and experience of an ordinary object would be to attune to the affect the encounter with that object generates. It is difficult, however, to imagine where affect is found and felt, and to set about locating it. In an attempt to picture it I imagine the invisible hum of an electronic device, the microwaves that emanate from it when

machine meets electricity. Or perhaps the split-second spark generated when two live wires touch. These analogies both describe a kinetic product resulting from the meeting of two things, however, they feel too perfect, too neatly contained and too predictable. What I am seeking, rather, is something apparent but indeterminate, and perhaps something in-between: the product of a meeting of two things and, in the moment of its creation, the blurring of two edges into one; or rather the moment, the area, where the two things become enmeshed, vibrating upon impact, and so are indistinguishable from one another, resistant to a steady view. The affect, then, is somewhere in, or is, this hazy contact point, where things cease to be things, if only for a moment, and dissolve into vibrations, echoes, mists and shadows.

Figure 3.1 Brad Lochore, *Swing 1977*, 1999.

These words: dissolve, vibrations, echoes, mists and shadows, are all ones I would use to describe, and are things I feel in Brad Lochore's paintings, and in this way his work becomes an influence on, and a resource for, this research. The object in *Swing 1977* (Figure 3.1) vibrates with recent use, a recent encounter, and though a painting might demand a kind of fixity in its very depiction of an object, in this painting the object resists focus, threatens to dissolve into the air around it. And perhaps what we are seeing is not the object at all, or not a painting of the object, but the shadow it casts spilling onto the support, and vibrating as it meets the tooth of the canvas and fails to find a steady ground. *Swing 1977* could be a depiction of affects, of those generated by an encounter with an object, and of those generated by an encounter with an artwork.

In similar ways *Fan* (Figure 3.2) and *Double Blind* (Figure 3.3) resist the urge to fix an object. Instead we find a shadow, a reflection, or a blurred after image. As viewers we are provided an impression of something no longer there, or something outside of the pictorial frame, so that our attention, instead, is trained on its unsteady remnants, or the forces the objects have generated. I can feel the gentle swirl of air dislodged by the ceiling fan above me; can hear the crinkly entangling of the blinds on the window behind me. The paintings evoke sensory memories by allowing space for them to arise: the objects referenced are ubiquitously familiar, but are also anonymous enough, disappeared enough, that sensation and affect take their place in our reading of the artworks. In a review of Lochore's *Still Life* series, published in the November 1998 edition of *Art Forum*, author Marek Bartelik writes: 'By floating pale images in a "milky" open space, Lochore skillfully emphasizes a vaporous tactility and the translucence of optical sensations,' and further, 'the works *play* with the notion of exact perception and the surrounding phenomenological concerns' (Bartelik 1998 n.p.). Here Bartelik detects concerns in Lochore's work that are also present in this research, and suggests that Lochore's positioning of pale, floating objects in open space is a key part of his work's ability to successfully engender notions of tactility and optical sensation.

Figure 3.2 Brad Lochore, *Fan*, 2003.

Figure 3.3 Brad Lochore, *Double Blind*, 2001.

Returning to my own work, exhibited in *Loyalty to the Thing*, and the ways I have thought and written about it here, I recall the negative space surrounding the objects in each of their pictorial frames, and how this, for me, did not denote emptiness, but rather allowed a space to breathe. The open spaces were not bereft of content, but rather were moments and spaces in between it, in which to pause, breathe and consider. In hindsight, and now in looking forward, I consider that this space, its relationship to the object depicted, and the edges of each: the moments where one meets the other, should become a greater focus in my creative research.

Chapter Four: The Trace of a Movement

In this home, the hallway is roughly 2.4 metres. A dimly lit channel which leads us from the open living spaces into the private, interior cul-de-sacs that are the bedroom, study and bathroom. Though at times the most private, the bathroom is, to us (the visitors), the most available of these spaces. The acts undertaken within, biologically necessary and repeated daily, are similarly available to all, but privately observed. There is a narrowing of focus in this space too. Outside events are suspended, and horizons removed, as the body finds an insulated pocket in which all things bend to its will, and are arranged in the service of it. The things contained in this space: plastics, liquids, fabrics and gels, are chosen in deference to, and also act as references to, the body. We can read them in terms of bodily use and effect, so that each one becomes less a distinct object, than a collection of sensations, and a material to be manipulated by the body.

Of plastic, Roland Barthes writes, 'it is less a thing than the trace of a movement' (Barthes 1991, 97). He characterises it as an infinitely transforming material, not loyal to one set of traits, but a ubiquitous 'imitation' material, a substance that is 'shaped' or moved from one form to another. He concludes: 'Plastic is wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used: ultimately, objects will be invented for the sole pleasure of using them.' In this way plastic becomes a kind of invisible material, the pleasure of it derived not from its material qualities, but from the kinds of use it allows.

So the apprehension of this form, the plastic bottle of handsoap that sits next to the sink, is guided by the way we use it. Its material so ubiquitous that it achieves a kind of anonymity and is able to slip away, sliding out of view, and leaving us instead with traces of form and memories of movement and use. The trace or memory of something, of this something, is a ghostly shadow of evidence, shuddering on the edge of disappearance. The left-overs of, or the place-holders for, a thing not entirely evident or observed. Turning back out into the hallway, re-entering the world, and widening our focus once more, the thing, the object, is entirely out of view, but its traces gently persist, finding echoes and reflections of themselves in materials and objects similarly held and used. (Crocker, 2016b)

In creating the works for *Loyalty to the Thing*, I had bought, used, and even borrowed from friends, to amass a collection of objects I could then pick and choose from. One or two would periodically be plucked from the herd, positioned on the desk next to my easel and then scrutinised as I looked for curves, edges, colours and surfaces to paint. These were the things, the details, that I considered my research and thinking to be leading me to; the things I needed to depict and translate through paint to serve my ideas and theoretical investigation. Something different happened, however, when I came to make the work for *The Trace of a Movement* exhibited at Applecross Art Space. Applecross Art Space was an Artist Run Initiative based in the home of artists David Attwood and Shannon Lyons, and as I looked at the photos I had taken of David and Shannon's bathroom, the reference material I planned to work from, I found an object and experience that was situated in space, an object that was still at home, still in use and still in the bodily space of the bathroom.

I was conscious of my body as I documented, moved around, Shannon and David's bathroom, not self-conscious or uncomfortable, but feeling a heightened awareness of how my body fit and related to the space. I stood at the basin as if to wash my hands, measured where on my body the bevelled edge of the counter rose to, stretched my arms and hands out to reach the bottle of soap to my left, and then pulled them back in to approach the sink directly below me, which seemed ready to cup and envelop my hands. As I heard Shannon clearing dishes and moving to her home office I was also conscious of the close and private space I had entered, where my body was now the sole reference point, the device with which to measure and interpret both space and object. Though I had thought about and considered the bodily experience of domestic objects in previous chapters and creative works, as I began to develop the work for this exhibition a shift in my thinking and perspective occurred, and I wondered if I had perhaps isolated myself, and the viewer, from that very experience by painting the objects out of space, and so perhaps out of bodily orbit. By documenting and subsequently painting the objects *in situ*, rather than extricating them from this space and supplanting it with my studio, I considered that I would be able to attend to both the object itself, the familiar curves and edges that can speak of and recall a sensory

engagement and memory of them, as well as the bodily space that is an integral part of this engagement, but was less successfully sought in previous works.

This shift in thinking came to the fore, was realised, with the creation of the work for *The Trace of a Movement*, however it had perhaps already begun with my discussion of Brad Lochore's work in the previous chapter. I consider Lochore's work to have offered me a kind of retroactive understanding of my own instincts and use of negative space in the works for *Loyalty to the Thing*, as well as a way forward, or a new lens through which to view the relationship between space and object. I found in his paintings a kind of kindred spirit for the language and phrases I had attached to my own ideas and paintings. I considered that Lochore's *Swing 1977* could be a depiction of affects; those generated by an engagement with an object and with an artwork. The almost-dissolution of the object into the space around it, its refusal to remain steady or fixed, spoke to me of affect, and sensory perception, the concerns I wanted to approach in my own work. However, my research also necessitated situating the objects in my work in a bodily space that speaks more specifically of the everyday affect and sensory perception I am interested in. What Lochore's work offered me was a consideration of the object in pictorial space, a lesson I could heed, however, as I developed the work for *The Trace of a Movement* I considered that I needed to ground my paintings in lived space, to more openly and generously gesture toward the spaces my chosen experiences take place in if I was to successfully reflect the embodied sensorial experience of a domestic everyday object.

In painting the work for *The Trace of a Movement* I painted not only the materiality of the object, but also the materiality of its surrounds, and the relationship between the two. The bathroom is a space that shines and reflects. Every surface is purposefully smooth, uncomplicated, impenetrable in the way that they refuse to absorb the after-effects, the traces, of their use. That is not to say that those traces are not there, however, but that rather than being absorbed they collect on the surface of things, and are all the more attainable for that. In a literal sense these could be the dribbles of calcified water on a glass shower screen, the webs of mildew and dust that collect in the grout between tiles, or the ring of soapy build-up at the base of a bottle,

accumulated, smudged and then reapplied through repeated use. But in another sense they could also be the wobbly reflections, or the hazy shadows created when one plastic and shiny surface meets another, falls onto another. These traces then, are evidence of existence and use: evidence of a physical object existing in time and space, and evidence of that object as being used and engaged with.

Figure 4.1 Mardi Crocker, *thank you*, 2016.

thank you (Figure 4.1), the work created for, and in response to, Applecross Art Space, attempts to consider these traces: noting the shadows and reflections generated when an object exists in a space, as well as the murkier residue the use of such an object might leave behind. Towards the base of the bottle there are moments or marks of indeterminacy, where the body of the bottle dissolves, sinks, into hazy greys that act as traces of its material and use. Shadows cast turn into smears, areas wiped out of and into existence, echoing the tactile memory of this space and this object. The brush-marks left exposed on the left of the object's body serve to de-solidify and destabilise it, so that it becomes less a coherently visible thing, and more a thing rubbed raw, pared back to expose a materiality that is more about touching than looking, and so is characteristic of how it is engaged with.

The scene moves to dissipate completely as it reaches the bottom right of the painting, so that it becomes a narrative incomplete or suspended. The spout of the bottle itself seems to look askance in that direction, and is echoed by grey brush-marks that begin to pull the eye downwards, as if they were bodies of water finding the edge of a flat plane and dutifully flowing over it. Following this movement, what the eye then finds in this area is something described through absence. A few marks and surrounding tonal shifts etch out the shape and curve of a sink, itself a kind of absence, so that it becomes less a form than the suggestion or possibility of one. By denying the sink enough information to coherently form itself it remains an impression, a possibility not quite achieved, so that the painting curtails a left to right, narrative reading in which the viewer finds soap and then sink and forms a story of use based on the easy identification of object and scene.

Instead, things are not quite as steady, and attention circles back to the bottle and the narrative is slowed or turned into something else entirely, less a linear story culminating in an event of use, and more a collection of sensory fragments, moments, that gesture toward the sensorial experiences of such objects. In this way the object and experiences attended to in this painting are both specific and unspecific. Or to put it another way, they are here, in this painting, but also elsewhere. While it's a depiction of a specific object and site, there are perhaps not enough steady and

particular details to hold it there. It drifts into the realm of memory, encourages the viewer to do so, and becomes less a record of one than an echo of many.

In *Every Day Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (2013), Michael Sheringham discusses French author Georges Perec's investigation of the everyday, and the dimension of memory Perec identifies as a component of it. Sheringham quotes Perec; 'a landscape, an emotion, or a sensation only begin to exist for me when memorized. But here memorized does not mean in my memory, but in a trace' (Perec in Sheringham 2013, 278), and concludes that the kind of memory Perec finds to be at work in the perception and experience of the everyday 'seems to be above all… an active "trace-making" notation that marks a connection established in the present, but that belongs to the field of memory because it draws on previous recognitions, conscious or unconscious' (Sheringham 2013, 278). Here memory is an active participant in our perception, or reading, of our everyday experiences. Rather than being a kind of repository, housing a collection of inviolable records, occasionally referenced but for the most part collecting dust, memory is instead an ongoing process, an always active faculty, drawing threads (some visible, or conscious, and some not) between one experience and another, or one dimension of that experience to another, or to many. Great webs are formed, dismantled and reformed, or redirected, as connections are continually made between one perceptual fragment and another. These webs, the threads that constitute them are, I think, Perec's traces, the tracks that connect present to previous, and that in the act of perceiving the present, continually re-call and implicate those of the past.

The concept of trace is also present in Roland Barthes's essay "Plastic" (1991, 97-99) from which I borrowed for both the text for the exhibition at Applecross Art Space and its title, *The Trace of a Movement*:

> So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement. (Barthes 1991, 97)

Barthes's theorisation of plastic allowed and encouraged me to consider a material, an object, as something that could be both existent and non-existent; to consider how, by virtue of its form and the very ubiquitousness of the material from which it is constructed, an object can fall, recede, into obscurity, and so become overlooked. I drew a parallel between the ordinary and everyday as overlooked, and the material of the objects themselves as being just as likely to fade or slip from view. For me, what was left behind in the event of disappearance or being overlooked, in both instances, were traces. I thought of these traces as being remnants of the engagement with the particular object I was painting, but also as the sensorial fragments, memories that tie themselves, thread themselves into other engagements with similar objects. I imagine these traces reaching backwards, perhaps in the way that Perec did, so that present perceptual experiences are made sense of through past experiences, but I also imagine them extending forward, or rather accompanying the body through every oncoming present, actively forging connections, so that the acts of trace making, and so memory, are lived and living and as such are integral parts of perception and experience.

In Chapter 2, I discussed C. Nadia Seremetakis's work on sensory memory in order to build an understanding of the role memory plays in sensory perception, however, having experienced a shift in my creative work towards a greater consideration of objects as situated, grounded in space, I find Seremetakis's work to also be insightful in approaching the sensory experience of objects as situated in time, space and cultural history. In "Memory of the Senses, Part I," Seremetakis asks: 'Is memory stored in specific everyday items that form the historicity of a culture, items that create and sustain our relationship to the historical as a sensory dimension?' (Seremetakis 1994a, 3). Applying that question to this research I consider the specific objects I have chosen to paint, the bottles of lotion and soap that are purchased on a semi-regular basis, used until their contents are depleted, and then discarded and replaced. These would certainly be everyday items, however their contributions to our sense of history and culture are not so easily or immediately assessed. In *Looking at the Overlooked*, Bryson writes of the familiar forms of still lifes: bowls, vases, jugs and plates (a lineage

to which today's plastic bottles would surely belong) as the products of cultural memory:

> The repeated shapes of the things in still life have been decided by consensus over many eras, and feel 'right' for the job. As such, they create a cultural field far larger than any single individual, or even any particular generation: those addressed by these ancient and familiar forms are only present members of a cultural family whose roots travel back into a vast preceding cultural community, which is in solidarity with each of the generations behind and ahead. (Bryson 1990, 138)

In this way, perhaps, as contemporary iterations of historical forms, the bottles I have chosen can imply and represent cultural historicity. However, this does not account for the second part of Seremetakis's question, that is, how the memory stored in such items might maintain our connection to history as a sensory one.

In approaching this question Seremetakis suggests that 'sensory memory, as the meditation on the historical substance of experience is not mere repetition but transformation which brings the past into the present as a natal event' (Seremetakis 1994a, 3). And because it allows for 'a moment of sensory self-reflexivity and because it is located within, and generated by, material forces, we can begin to see how material culture functions as an apparatus for the production of *social and historical reflexivity*' (Seremetakis 1994a, 7). What I take from Seremetakis's claim is that sensory memories are re-called and re-experienced with new or present-time material experiences, and so objects, as the initiators or active generators of those experiences, also generate and sustain connections to the sensory dimension of experiences past. In dispensing and lathering my soap in the shower this morning, or tracing and tapping the keys on my laptop as I wrote this, I enacted material engagements with objects that elicit sensory memories of prior experiences and so maintain a connection to the sensory dimension of my personal history.

In "Memory of the Senses, Part I," Seremetakis writes of the disappearance of Aphrodite's peach from her native homeland of Greece. In reflecting on the experience of this loss, and the search for the remembered taste of that particular

variety, she considers its disappearance to be 'a double absence; it reveals the extent to which the senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence' (Seremetakis 1994a, 2). As regionally specific fruits like the peach were replaced with foreign foods, like the kiwi, in an increasingly universalized European market under the European Economic Community (EEC), Seremetakis considers that:

> For me the peach had been both eaten and remembered, but for the younger generation it was now digested through memory and language… For the younger generation, the remembered first peach exists on the same exotic plane as the kiwi. For the generation that follows, the kiwi, no longer exotic, may evoke a different sensibility. (Seremetakis 1994a, 2)

The sensory experience and memories of a material object, and the subsequent absence of it, contribute to a sense of historicity for Seremetakis, with impacts felt at both a personal level, and in her wider cultural community. Building on the example of the peach, Seremetakis detects a 'sensory displacement' taking place as a result of the economic practices of the EEC: 'Sensory premises, memories and histories are being pulled out from under entire regional cultures' as the 'EEC project implicitly constitutes a massive resocialization of existing consumer cultures and sensibilities, as well as a reorganization of public memory' (Seremetakis 1994a, 3). In "Memory of The Senses, Part 1," Seremetakis considers and builds a case for the role of the senses and memory in our experience and understanding of material culture and history. What I believe she is also doing is locating history and material culture at the level of the everyday, and elucidating the potential of sensorial experiences and memories of the everyday to comment on and claim significance in those arenas. 'Sensory changes occur microscopically through everyday accretion; so, that which shifts the material culture of perception is itself imperceptible and only appears after the fact in fairy tales, myths and memories that hover at the margins of speech' (Seremetakis 1994a, 3). To hover at the margins of speech is perhaps to go unnoticed or unremarked upon, or to only exist in traces that require assemblage, that require a threading together to form something solid or meaningful, or for that meaning to be detected. Paying

attention to these traces then, to sensory memories of the everyday, can allow us to grasp time, to grasp changes and histories, personal and universal.

In Seremetakis's work I find a number of ideas that influence and encourage my own research. Seremetakis detects and attaches significance to sensory perception and sensory memory in the fields of cultural theory and anthropology, she positions the objects and materials of everyday experience as affective, and by her own example she displays the knowledge that can be gleaned in attending to and reflecting upon the personal experiences of such objects and materials. She shares an affinity with writers like Perec and Stewart in that she finds paying attention to the ordinary and everyday to be a productive and valuable exercise, that it is an area of life worth being attuned to and immersed in. Although pursuing different ends, or situating their research in different fields, I believe there is a shared premise at the core of each body of work: an attunement to the affects of the ordinary.

For Seremetakis the initial impetus for this attunement was a disappearance. The disappearance of Aphrodite's peach from her everyday life meant that the thing itself became transfigured, or was felt differently, and she came to think of it differently, or to think of it more. I am reminded of Berger's disappearance, discussed in Chapter 2, and I wonder if this disappearance could be thought of in the same way, or if the disappearance of the peach and the kinds of attention and noticing it engendered could be applied to Berger's disappearances. In both instances I am speaking of a thing removed from view, out of reach, and although, in my earlier discussion of Berger's words this came about through a conditioned mode of seeing, and culturally learned value judgments, perhaps the effects can be the same, in that both things disappeared leave behind traces, sensory memories, and affects. In the following chapter I return to the genre of still life painting, with a discussion of celebrated Italian painter Giorgio Morandi's work, and an analysis that questions the notion of stillness in relation to the genre and the human perception and experience of the things, objects, it is concerned with. I revisit Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* and Maurizia Boscagli's writing on new materialism, and introduce theorist Rita Felski's

writing on the everyday, in order to continue developing and strengthening my argument for an alternate approach and new attitude toward the stuff of the everyday.

Chapter Five: Considdetta Realtá

In the foreword to *Giorgio Morandi: Late Paintings* (2017, 7-8), editor David Leiber writes:

> In today's reality, an environment of infinite visual stimuli and artistic possibility, Morandi's 'abstract' loyalty to the object is particularly moving and inspiring. How can you do so much with so little! When Morandi talked about reality, he referred to it as the 'so-called reality' (*considdetta realtá*). This moment of hesitation about reality allowed him to create meaningful layers of the visible world, which we are still peeling off today. (Leiber 2017, 8)

Morandi's objects were a collection of bottles, vases and boxes, household objects made of ceramics, glass and tin that he continually revisited, re-arranged and re-imagined throughout his career. These were the objects, the objecthood, he was so loyal to, and the 'so little' he worked with. And the 'so much' he was able to do:

> A tension between still-ness and implied movement emerges. The shapes can become soft and fragile, and morph into something else. The edges, especially the tops of his objects, may fuse into an unknown atmosphere… Dark shadows are not obliged to follow the logic of light and shade, but to balance or enhance a quiet drama. And as your eye meanders through a painting, a prominent brushstroke may catch your attention. Morandi quietly and consistently plays with us, with our anticipation and perception. (Leiber 2017, 8)

Morandi plays with our perception of the ordinary through paint. His objects morph and move, holding fast in some areas, or moments, and dissipating in others, so that the reality of the thing is not one steadfast truth or fact, but many movable ideas, sensations and affects. I do not see this as a transformation, an embellishment or editorialisation on his part, but rather an attunement: a loyalty to every shimmer, every dusty edge and every curve that wobbles. They wobble because they are hard to see, it is hard to follow the perfect curve of an ellipse, or the subtly inclining edge of a perfectly mass-produced item like a jug or bottle, so why paint them as perfectly

curved and contained? Instead, his hand and brush find the wobbles that our eyes do, the unsteadiness we encounter when light falls on an impossibly smooth surface and our eye struggles to find a landing point, a detail with which to hold steady, still, and re-orient ourselves. Morandi's work denies the viewer steadiness, and I wonder if this is the anticipation Leiber writes of. In coming to a still life painting the viewer often anticipates, expects a steadiness, a frozen moment of surety in which reality can be glimpsed. Instead, as Leiber suggests, Morandi plays with us, plays with this anticipation and finds that reality is instead an ever-moving target, 'abstract,' subject to perception and its affects.

Figure 5.1 Giorgio Morandi, *Still life (Natura morta)*, 1957

If there is a moment of steadiness, however, a moment of solidity, present in Morandi's paintings it is not found in the object itself, or our conception of the object as presented, but rather in the brushstrokes that construct it:

> I studied his brushes on one of the days I visited his studio and wondered which ones he called upon to paint his line into his paintings. Subtle variations in thickness and thinness, value and hue, changed his line and his painting ever so slightly. These were not quick gestural lines. They were slow and studied, found as he nudged his brush along a contour or around a form; they lead the eye into a shadow or dissolve the line into the negative space or background. Morandi knew how to use line in a 'still' life and take the viewer's eyes on a quiet, slow dance through his paintings. He knew what a caressing, supportive, and subtle line could bring into a painting, its role never mannered and gratuitous but certain and anchored. (Carroll 2017, 66)

In the short text *Not a Template Painter* (2017, 65-67), also published in *Giorgio Morandi: Late Paintings*, fellow artist and painter Lawrence Carroll writes of a visit to Morandi's studio, and of the effect of the artist's brushstrokes on the viewer. The lines, marks and strokes in Morandi's paintings serve not only to describe the thing painted, but also to describe, and encourage, a way of looking. If, as I have suggested, the eye wobbles, errs, over a perfect form, trying to find a point of traction or certainty, in Morandi's paintings these moments might be found in the paint itself. These moments, however, do not render the objects still, do not make the paintings feel still, sure and of reality, rather they provide gentle guidelines, traces, that induce Carroll's 'quiet, slow dance' of the eye through the painting (Carroll 2017, 66).

Carroll places 'still' in quotation marks when referencing the genre of still life in regard to Morandi's work, and Leiber too remarks upon the tension between stillness and movement in Morandi's paintings. As I researched and considered the genre myself, I increasingly wondered if the word still is a misnomer here, or at least should be eyed with more scrutiny. In *Nature Morte* (2013), Michael Petry writes:

> The still life came into its own in the mid-seventeenth century when the Flemish term *stilleven* first came to be applied to oil paintings characterized by their tight

> focus on an assortment of objects sitting on a flat surface, depicted not as a subsidiary element in a wider narrative but as a subject in its own right… From *stilleven*, the German *stilleben* and the English 'still life' came into use, but their allusion to still or unmoving nature has never done full justice to the allegorical themes that underpin these works and, ultimately, lend them their gravitas. (Petry 2013, 6)

Petry goes on to suggest that the French term ' "*nature morte*," literally "dead nature," ' coined one hundred years later, serves to do more justice to the genre (Petry 2013, 6). I, however, wish to situate my own work and research somewhere between these two terms. I imagine my work as preceding gravitas, lingering with the object before lofty themes of death and mortality can be attached to it. Allowing the objects simply to be, to remain ordinary, and although it is perhaps an impossible to task to separate object from symbolic meaning or attachment—and not necessarily one I want to undertake—what I aim to do instead, and what I believe Morandi does so well, is eke out a little bit of space, for object and viewer alike, between seeing and knowing. That is, slowing the pace between encountering an object and reading it; as Kathleen Stewart writes, 'to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us' (Stewart 2007, 4). The objects I have chosen to study and depict do not fascinate; belonging to the category of the everyday, they are necessarily overlooked. However, this does not mean that they are entirely without complexity, or unworthy of such efforts of attention. Rather it means that the complexities present lie in another in-between space, somewhere between viewer and object, in the uncertain realm of perception. Similarly, in the 2017 essay "In Plain Sight", published on her website, Jude Rae writes:

> Something similar drives me to return time and again to the genre of still life. This often small, quiet category of painting has informed all my work from portraits to larger interiors as well as etching and video. The least rhetorical of the observation based modes, it can have a wordless eloquence that takes one back to the very condition of painting. Traditionally loaded up with allegory and religious symbolism, the trappings of status or domesticity, I prefer its other inclinations: to detail, to the overlooked, even the abject. Unlike other genres which lend themselves to expression

> and narrative, still life is a strange and largely mute mixture of the analytical and the sensual. (Rae 2017, n.p.)

Returning to stillness and the genre of still life, to 'still and unmoving nature,' I wonder if the word still hampers the genre, or the works attributed to it. Or if, perhaps, the definition of it can be expanded, understood differently in this context. Stewart writes: 'A still life is a static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance' (Stewart 2007, 19) and 'an intimate scene charged with the textures of paint and desire' (2007, 18), a description I find could easily be applied to the work of Morandi. I think of stillness less as a frozen snapshot than a pregnant pause. I imagine being on the farm where I grew up, clambering over fences that separated pasture and paddock from unkempt scrub and bushland. In the sweltering summer the birds and insects, even the flies, have found somewhere cooler to shelter, and the river below has slowed to the point of stopping. Livestock are grazing elsewhere and no vehicles or voices can be heard. Someone describes it as perfectly still. A phrase absorbed from one book or another, an anonymous literary voice tells me: this is perfectly still. It is not though, it cannot be. I cannot hold myself perfectly still. Sand shifts beneath my feet, I blink and my eyes wander. Even if I hold my breath, parts of my body I cannot control continue to move, and I don't see or feel a stillness at that moment, but rather I feel a tightness and throbbing, anticipating the moment of release. There is no such thing as perfect stillness, always something throbs, whirrs, accumulates in the background, ready to move again, or always, however imperceptibly, already moving. The condition of life is unstill, and so, therefore, is that of perception.

In refuting the possibility of stillness, the possibility of human perception of a perfect stillness, I am also refuting the concept of inert matter, the idea that a human subject could experience matter as inert. This brings me back to Maurizia Boscagli's writing on theories of 'new materialisms,' in which the subject-object divide is explicitly challenged and re-thought. Boscagli writes: '[Bruno] Latour's notion of the quasi-subject quasi-object—that is, of a radically other (dis)order of things in which friable subjects and mutable objects intervene in each others' being—may be the pivotal idea of the new materialism' (Boscagli 2014, 3). And that each of the theories held under

the banner of new materialism present 'versions of the material as unruly: they refuse to play by the rules that define materiality as passive matter'; instead, theirs is 'a sense of a world in which matter is in flux' and as such, they offer the reader 'promising new versions of subject-object entanglements' (Boscagli 2014, 3).

In an earlier chapter I discussed Boscagli's writing on new materialism, alongside that of Daniel Miller and Matthew Crawford, in order to provide a theoretical context for this research project as well as to develop an argument, build a rationale, for my own investigation of everyday objects. This project, too, seeks to elucidate 'promising new versions of subject-object entanglements,' seeks to re-think, to look at differently, and to feel differently, our engagements with the ordinary materials that surround us. Differently, not in the hopes of changing the character of such engagements, for that runs the risk of elevating the stuff of the everyday out of that category altogether, and it is not the aim of this research to do so. In her essay "The Invention of Everyday Life" (2000, 77-98), theorist Rita Felski writes:

> Influenced by modernist ideals of innovation and irony, contemporary theorists have tended to either excoriate the everyday for its routine, mundane qualities, or celebrate the everyday by pretending that such qualities do not exist. It is time, perhaps, to make peace with the ordinariness of daily life. (Felski 2000, 95)

Taking up Felski's suggestion, this research seeks, firstly, to make peace, to allow the ordinary to remain ordinary, and in a similar vein Boscagli writes:

> The problem now is not to turn the relationship between subject and object on its head, or to recuperate the object and give it new primacy, but rather to reconfigure this relationship in terms of relationality and entanglements. (Boscagli 2014, 20)

It is not the aim of this research to turn the unfascinating into the fascinating; the difference, or the change in thinking, looking and feeling that this research aims to enact and encourage does not take effect, or operate, on the object itself, and similarly does not seek a new final knowing or conception of such objects for the subject. Instead it situates itself between the two, exploring the relations and entanglements

that take place there, detecting moments of contact, seen and felt, and asking what it might mean to pay attention to the affects generated there.

Chapter Six: Within Touching Distance

In her paper "The Potential of Paying Attention: Tripping and the Ethics of Affective Attentiveness" (2014), theorist Maria Cichosz explores the ethical potential of paying attention to the 'affective texture of the everyday.' Moving away from traditional understandings of 'tripping' as related to drug use, she develops it as a conceptual and philosophical framework:

> As a mode of being encompassing a wide spectrum of experiences… not as separate from other forms of experience, such as reading, art, sport, or meditation, but as an affectively-amplified part of a continuum of consciousness that can teach us something about how we relate to the world. (Cichosz 2014, 55)

Conceptualizing tripping as a mode of being in which everyday affects are amplified, Cichosz uses it as a framework with which to pay attention to such affects, 'that which is hidden in plain sight all around us,' and to ultimately investigate the ethical potential that lies in such attentiveness (Cichosz 2014, 55).

Cichosz opens her paper with a discussion of the term 'affect,' referencing Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's *The Affect Theory Reader*, a collection of articles on affect published in 2010. In this collection she finds a generally agreed upon understanding of the term as encompassing 'the various capacities of bodies (whether animate or inanimate, living or non-living) to affect and be affected, and refers to forces and intensities that are visceral, precede conscious knowing and insist *beyond emotion*' (Cichosz 2014, 56). The emphasis on 'beyond emotion' is Cichosz's own, and in the discussion that follows she emphasises the importance of the distinction between emotion and affect. She writes that 'many studies of affect take definite, clearly circumscribed emotions as their starting point,' and while 'naming emotions is key in theoretical models that categorize and label affects so that they can be more effectively analysed' (Cichosz 2014, 56), such scholarship can lead to the two terms being used interchangeably, and in the process determining and placing limitations on our understanding of affects. Cichosz presents Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* as a

point of contrast here, noting that Stewart consistently resists categorization and the naming of feelings in her work, presenting 'a variety of experiences that are not quite emotions and cannot be easily classified as such' (Cichosz 2014, 56). Instead, Stewart presents affects as undefined forces and intensities, and according to Cichosz, 'it is precisely amorphousness and a lack of definition that opens affect to a form of ethical potentiality more definite understandings of emotion foreclose' (Cichosz 2014, 56).

Having established affect as indeterminate and undefined Cichosz draws a parallel with the experience of the trip as something which is also 'felt rather than understood': 'In tripping there are affective intensities that cannot be easily pinned down for analysis, momentary feelings that pass before they can be fully grasped as disparate emotions' (Cichosz 2014, 56). For Cichosz, tripping is essentially pre-cognition; it comes before, or resists, coherent thought and language, and so resists analysis, representation and definition, and 'this lack (indeed, impossibility) of definition marks the trip as a space of openness and potential' (Cichosz 2014, 56). According to Cichosz, the trip is an experience that opens us up to the existence of affects, suspending analytical thought and understanding; it exposes and brings into view the forces, intensities, sensations and feelings, *affects,* that are present in the everyday but are overlooked, 'hidden in plain sight,' in usual modes of being.

Cichosz then comes to the question of attention, and how it might be possible to pay attention to something as amorphous and undefined as affect. Cichosz argues that while affects may resist categorization and definition, they are nevertheless perceptible, and paying attention to affects does not entail understanding or defining them, but rather, being aware that they exist:

> My notion of attentiveness, then, entails a mode of being that is less concerned with rational intentionality, which is only a step away from the desire to classify an undefined impulse, and more concerned with living in a state of openness to all sorts of sensations, even ones that cannot be immediately understood or do not necessarily feel good to us. Rather than trying to know affects in a way that pins them down as static objects of analysis, or attempting to 'catch' such sensations at the very moment of their incipience in some utopian effort to eliminate the preconscious gap (which

> would be impossible, anyway), attentiveness requires us simply to be *aware* that something is happening. (Cichosz 2014, 57)

The first line of Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* reads: '*Ordinary Affects* is an experiment, not a judgement' (Stewart 2007, 1), and it's one that I believe also encapsulates Cichosz's notion of attentiveness, and my own in the context of this research. What is shared here is a spirit of openness that wishes to avoid, or more accurately, suspend, analytical thought, in favour of being receptive, attuned to, and immersed in the affects present in everyday life. The end goal in paying attention to these affects is not to ground them, to find ways to define and categorize them, but rather to feel that they exist, and that they mold and shape lived experience on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment, level.

The 'affective texture of the everyday' as Cichosz put it, and the wobbliness I attribute to Morandi's works are ideas that have clung to me, that have persisted, as I attempted to take breaks from this project, and carry on with the other demands of daily life. It never feels like a break though, but rather a momentary change in focus, while the project whirrs quietly in the background, subconsciously pulling things together and tearing them apart again, until I turn around to focus on it once again. In re-focussing I find that some things have fallen away, or rather have sunk, like sediment, to the floor of this project—not to be left out entirely but to allow something else, perhaps something more important, to bubble to the surface and occupy, even lead, my thinking. In the time I took for the Christmas and New Year break of 2017/18, Cichosz's words and Morandi's work continued to bubble up and over, and I began to interrogate the body of work I exhibited in *Within Touching Distance* at Spectrum Project Space in October of 2017 against them.

> These things inhabit our bodily orbit, 'a half-lit place of blurs and glimpses,' where everything is within reach, arranged to be touched and felt for without looking. They are also unremarkable, ubiquitous, and easily and often replaced, and so, are twice overlooked. Despite this they persist, or something of them persists. Traces and remnants, affects; impressions of shape and shadow, of surface and texture, sensory

> memories are generated and recalled when our bodies meet theirs, or look past them. (Crocker 2017)

The body of work exhibited in *Within Touching Distance* was the latest iteration of this research project, and attempted to heed and respond to findings made with previous works and shows. Six paintings, four the size of an A3 sheet of paper and two measuring 61 by 45.5cm, hung in a large and spacious gallery, arranged by myself, with the use of moveable walls, to form an L shape which was compartmentalised into three room-like interior spaces. Gently spot-lit, on expansive white walls, I wanted it to feel, at first glance, that the rooms might be empty, that these pale and small paintings almost weren't there, and that these small details on otherwise blank walls might initially be missed or be obscured by the architecture that houses them, so that it required a bodily action, a deliberate movement into the spaces, to encounter them. The idea of a minimal install that could create a feeling of airiness and the sensation of having space to breathe, occurred to me, and felt like an integral component in viewing the creative outcomes of this research, when I exhibited *Loyalty to the Thing*, at the beginning of this project, and felt equally important to me with the installation of this show. Probing it further, I consider that a predominantly white and bright room, like a gallery, is not unlike a bathroom, and parallels can be drawn between the space I am engaging with and the one I am placing the works in. And my deliberate arrangement of the gallery into smaller spaces, and the hanging of works close to corners, too, reflects the intimacy of a bathroom. I'm not sure, however, that I, or many others, would consider the bathroom to be airy and spacious. This idea comes from somewhere else, and I believe is more of a reflection of the gentle attunement that I am attempting to enact and even engender with this work. It is important to me that my paintings do not elevate the depicted objects out of the category of the ordinary, overlooked, everyday, rather, I want to allow them to remain ordinary, and instead draw attention to the experience of them and their affects, to engender a contemplation of these affects in the viewer. For me, this means a quietness, a gentle slowing down, pauses, and moments of reflection. None of these works, then, are going to make demands of you as the viewer, or assert dominance

over the space they inhabit. Rather, they act as small inklings, threads to pull on, impressions to remember and revisit.

Figure 6.1 Installation view from *Within Touching Distance*, 2017, Spectrum Project Space. Photograph by Bo Wong

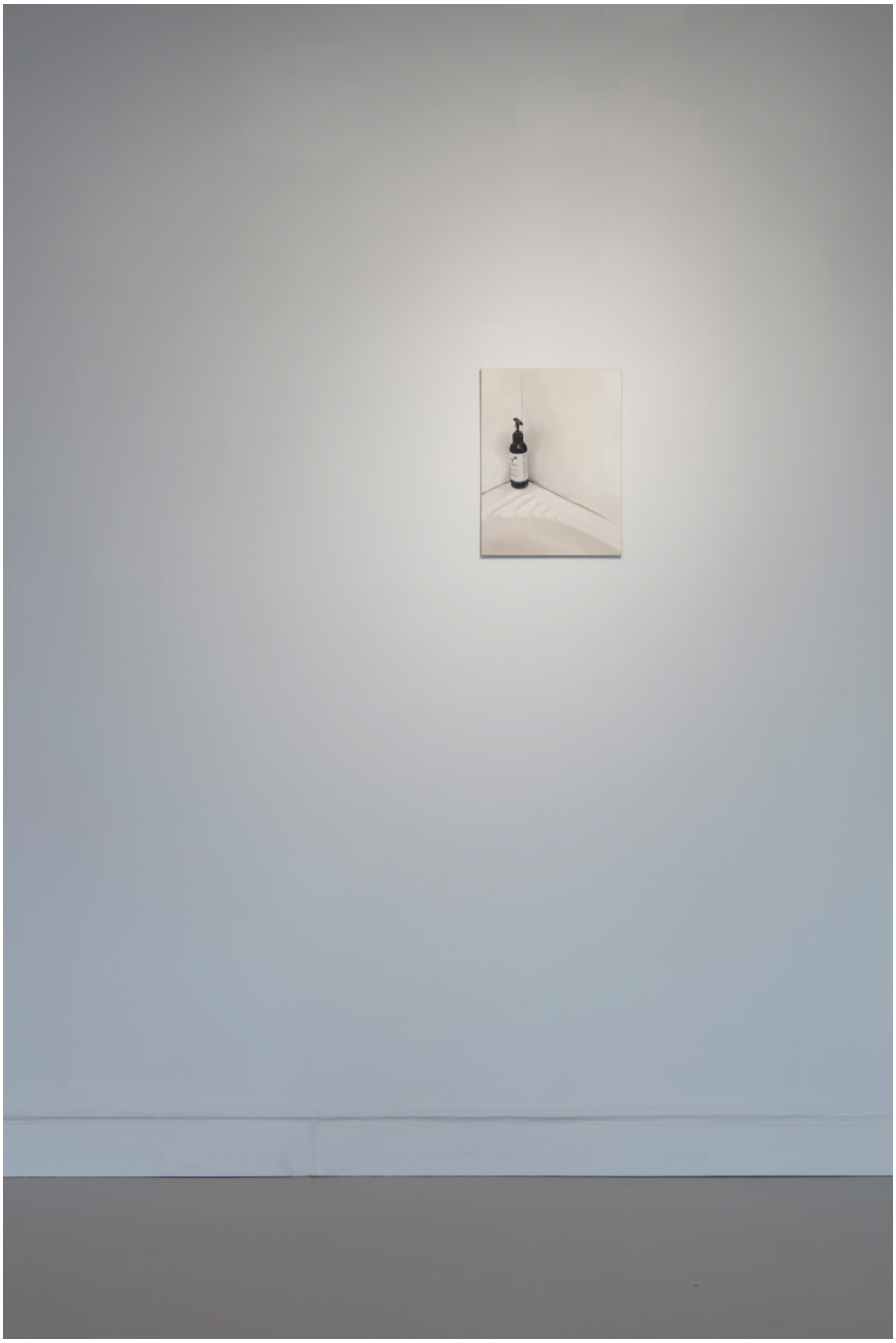

Figure 6.2 Installation view from *Within Touching Distance*, 2017, Spectrum Project Space. Photograph by Bo Wong

Figure 6.3 Installation view from *Within Touching Distance*, 2017, Spectrum Project Space. Photograph by Bo Wong

Figure 6.4 Installation view from *Within Touching Distance*, 2017, Spectrum Project Space. Photograph by Bo Wong

Figure 6.5 Installation view from *Within Touching Distance*, 2017, Spectrum Project Space. Photograph by Bo Wong

Figure 6.6 Installation view from *Within Touching Distance*, 2017, Spectrum Project Space. Photograph by Bo Wong

Small is a key word here, has been a key word and feeling throughout this project. Small painting supports have continually felt right for the job as I have approached new objects and the creation of new works. In a 2016 *Vogue* article, Arts writer Dodie Kazanjian announced: 'A quiet revolution in painting is seeing artists reject large-scale, bombastic installations in favor of intimate subjects and techniques' (Kazanjian 2016, n.p.). In what she considers to be a reaction against the globalism of today and 'the overblown, space-filling, mixed-media installations that the critic Peter Schjeldahl described in 1999 as "festival art"—made for the commercial art fairs that have proliferated internationally for almost two decades' Kazanjian detects a trend in the art world toward: 'personal, intimate, and sometimes (but not always) small-scale paintings' (Kazanjian 2016, n.p.). Kazanjian cites the exhibition titled *Intimisms*, held at New York's James Cohan Gallery, in June to July 2016, in which 'mostly small figurative paintings by 26 artists' were exhibited, and quotes influential director of the Tate Sir Nicholas Serota as saying: 'It doesn't surprise me at all that people are sitting in studios making intimate, confessional, personal art at this moment' (Serota in Kazanjian 2016, n.p.). It seems, then, that painting small indicates a turn to the personal and intimate, eschewing the global in favour of the local, a movement and viewpoint my research in this project also adopts—not to cordon off the wider world or to deny its affects, but to feel those affects on an intimate scale, on the individual, and on the body.

In the article Kazanjian writes of contemporary painters Njideka Akynyili Crosby and Shara Hughes and their expression of the intimate and personal. Crosby creates vibrant and deeply personal collage paintings, often depicting figures from her life in intimate domestic settings, while Hughes's work, described by the artist as 'psychological landscapes' are exuberant, fantastical, loosely painted landscapes in which the strokes of the brush, the gestures of the artist, are deliberately visible. For Kazanjian, these painters and their practices are examples of the 'intimate and honest painting we're seeing now,' (Kazanjian 2016, n.p.), in which the bombastic spectacle is exchanged for smaller moments of personal expression and perspective. It would seem that, in this article, small refers not only to the physical size of a painting but

also its thematic scope, or perhaps, rather, it's something to do with the feeling of 'personal-ness' that the paintings generate. There is a sensation that these paintings come from the artist, from somewhere close to their body and their lived experience. Their gazes are not ones that look out, far and wide, but rather look across, with the slightest of movements, to the living room or kitchen in Crosby's case, or perhaps down and inward, to the mind's eye and the communion of brush and paint, in the case of Hughes's work. On first inspection there is very little shared between the work of these artists and my own in this research, however, I think a second look reveals a shared interest in the small—the intimate, personal and localised experience of the world.

In returning to the more literal understanding of the word 'small,' I also wish to reflect on the distinction between 'study' and 'painting' that seems to challenge the importance or integrity of small works. It's a curious distinction to me—that a small work is often read, at first glance, to be the study for something greater, grander and ultimately bigger. Perhaps this is a side-effect of the trend Kazanjian has described—the tendency toward large-scale, bombastic works that has proliferated in art fairs over the last two decades and presumably filtered down to art schools and studios worldwide. I remember what it was like to begin my studies in art—the small scale drawings and paintings from my diaries and meagre home supplies and studio could now be unleashed upon the world, translated into bigger, better, more impactful works. A greater mastery of technique, and investment of time would also seem to be inferred with large-scale works—perhaps it is symptomatic of youth and/or ambition to want to impress your viewer, to hold them in awe in the face of a work that could engulf their body and vision. These are not the only reasons to create large scale paintings, and I don't wish to challenge the rigour and integrity of all large-scale paintings, but rather, what I am getting at is that there is an assumed jump from humble study to large final work that need not always take place. It is my contention that humble may be just the 'thing' for some works and artistic practices, and that a theorisation of contemporary painting, and indeed the viewing audience, should allow such works a greater claim of artistic merit and worth.

In a 2015 article published online, writer Julie L. Belcove interviews painter Cecily Brown, discussing her recent move to small-scale paintings:

> People would see them and say, 'Are they studies for the big ones?'… That got on my nerves because they weren't. I joked that the big ones had become studies for the small ones. The big ones seemed very fast and loose, and the small ones were very neurotic. There was a while I called them 'The Neurotic Paintings.' They were so intense, very painterly, the paint got thicker. You have to believe the viewer has a more intimate relationship because you have to get up close. (Brown in Belcove 2015, n.p.)

Like Brown, I imagine smaller paintings to ask different things of both myself as painter, and the audience as viewer. A small work can entice a viewer to come close, it can effect a physical intimacy with the viewer, and it also effects that sense of intimacy with the artist. I've written previously about wanting to reflect the physical engagement had with the objects I depict in the way that they are painted, intending thinly applied washes of paint and areas wiped into and out of existence to mirror the bodily experience of the objects and their environment. I've written also, about these objects inhabiting our bodily orbit, and as I bring that idea to bear in thinking about the scale of the works I begin to consider that, in painting on small surfaces I am translating small movements of bodily maintenance into small movements of paint. Belcove describes Brown's small works as 'diminutive enough to hold in your lap… none more than 17 inches tall or long' (Belcove 2015, n.p.) and in doing so gives voice to a way in which I have thought about my own work. I think about my paintings as being held. Not in the sense that they belong in a person's grasp rather than on a wall, but in the sense that, upon viewing, standing in front of and relating to them bodily, the viewer encounters a touchable, holdable object. When composing the paintings I aimed to create a true to life scale, so that the objects feel as though they are within reach, within touching distance. The objects depicted inhabit the close, intimate space of the bathroom and I wanted the work to reflect the bodily experience of this space, initiating a bodily remembering of the natural movements, the reaching and touching, that takes place there.

I have endeavoured not to enact an overly personal view-point in my compositions; it is not so much 'this is how *I* see things' but rather, 'this is a way to see things that already exist—a moment of looking and feeling something already seen.' In the essay titled "Everyday Speech" (1993, 238-245), first published in 1962, influential French theorist and philosopher Maurice Blanchot writes of the everyday:

> It is the unperceived, first in the sense that one has always looked past it; nor can it be introduced into a whole or 'reviewed', that is to say, enclosed within a panoramic vision; for, by another trait, the everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again, having always already seen it by an illusion that is, as it happens, constitutive of the everyday. (Blanchot 1993, 240)

I encountered Blanchot's writing on the everyday in my honours year and this particular passage was integral to my thinking then, and has no doubt influenced my approach to the everyday in this research. I understand the everyday to be ineffable, ever present and always changing, it is essential and also meaningless, the repetitive and mundane areas of life that are simultaneously inconsequential and essential to all other pursuits. It refuses to be resolutely defined or 'reviewed' as Blanchot puts it, and has no particular 'subject' of its own. It is something more like a level of existence, universal and also singular, that encapsulates the routine, the mundane, the boring and the overlooked in daily life. Reflecting on this quote now, in the midst of this research, I think the reason it struck me, and continues to do so, is because it brings the body and the act of looking, into the everyday. It's almost as if I can imagine myself, the first-person body, stood in the thick of everydayness, not able to encapsulate it in my vision, but rather catching glimpses of its elusive self, finding inklings and fragments of it in sights that have already been seen and already feel something like a barely recorded memory. The everyday becomes a kind of haze of familiarity, and I'm grasping at the moments, textures, sensations and affects that it creates and imparts.

Figure 6.7 Jude Rae *SL374*, 2017

This brings me back to Cichosz's texture of the everyday and the wobbliness of Morandi's work that I spoke of earlier in this chapter. Towards the end of 2017 I purchased issue 41 of Australian arts magazine *Artist Profile* and flipped with excitement to the profile of Jude Rae. I suppose I had expected to be most enthralled by the words—by Rae's own words and the discussion of her work—which is not to say that I was disappointed by them, but that, having finished reading the article, it was something else that struck me. I have never seen one of Rae's works in the flesh before, every encounter I have had with her work has been mediated by computer screen or small printed page. However, on pages 74 – 76, two paintings were reproduced in minute detail and across great swathes of the page. It was as if, for the first time, I could see paintings *SL359* and *SL374* (Figure 6.7) clearly, as if I was able to stand close, and feel the vibration of colour and mark, every drag of the brush against the tooth of the canvas. Where Morandi's objects wobble Rae's seem to fizz and hum, but importantly, it's to the same effect. It feels like a drier application of paint; paint

clings to paint as it's dragged across the canvas, leaving breaks in the surface, tiny cracks and valleys where the illusion of the objects and settings break apart and the underpainting shows through. A clear glass bottle stands in the middle of *SL374*, but there are no smooth edges to be found there, what we see instead is the play of light and reflection, a cacophony of marks that bounce and cling, edges that become fuzzy and indeterminate. It's as if the whole thing, the objects, refuse to come into focus, instead remaining on the periphery of vision, in a place where texture and sensation can claim primacy. If I blur my eyes for a moment, stand back, the objects seem to solidify, but returning to my normal vision I breathe a sigh of relief and the objects seem to do so too, loosening, relaxing their borders, re-joining the hazy atmosphere they are situated in—when the pressure of solidity and realism is removed the objects can be seen for their affects, and the texture of the everyday, of everyday looking, can come to the fore.

Reflecting on my own work, I wonder if I can claim to offer the same things. On first inspection, my application of paint would seem to be worlds away from Rae's. A common thread running through all of my recent works is the thinning of paint and colour. I apply paint in thin veils, not to obscure, but to reveal. The white primed surface of my supports acts as the neutral surface of a bathroom wall or ledge, or the molded plastic of a bathtub, and the paint hangs like barely coloured steam in areas—present and visible, but only just, liable to blow away or evaporate. And where the paint does become stronger and wants to exert its physical presence, I push and pull, accumulating in some areas and wiping away in others so that the action of the brush becomes evident and there is a liveliness, a feeling of movement, however subtle, and an inkling that things could fall apart or dissolve at any moment. In this way a similarity can be found between Rae's work and my own, and Morandi's too. The very materiality of paint, the method *of* painting, is integral to the works and the reading of them.

Figure 6.8 Mardi Crocker, *Bathox*, 2017. Photograph by Bo Wong.

In reflecting on the body of work exhibited in *Within Touching Distance* I have felt a slight unease that I feel it's important to discuss and examine at this stage of the research. Not to suggest I am unhappy with the works, but that I have felt moments of tightness, noticed a growing tendency toward tightness, that I feel I can track through the chronological development of the works in the show. In an earlier work like *Bathox* (Figure 6.8), the molded edges of the bathtub are wiped gesturally into existence and the object itself, particularly in the top half, feels like a collection of

loosely woven marks that only just pull the object together. With these kinds of painterly gestures and marks the sensorial nature of the everyday, the texture of it, and the everyday's refusal to hold still and stand solid is reflected.

In a later work like *Perfect Whip* (Figure 6.9) I endeavoured to echo the hazy atmosphere of *Bathox* in the sculpting of the bath and the washy description of the reflections and shadows that fall and disperse on the wall behind the objects. *Perfect Whip* consciously takes a different direction, and offers different things than *Bathox*, in that it presents a group of objects, is larger in size (61 x 45.5 cm) and encompasses a greater area of pictorial space. I imagined it as the view a body might encounter on stepping into or out of the bath or shower. With greater space and importance given to the environment the objects are situated in, I wanted to consider—with both this work and the other large work *QV* (Figure 6.10) —the way the curves and hollows of a bathtub could create a pictorial space to be entered, drawn into. These are spaces to be stepped into, to be moved into; it's a familiar, daily action that brings the viewer into an intimate, body-centric space, and so I conceived of these paintings as perhaps being able to amplify the sensations of bodily intimacy and familiarity I hope this project and work to engender.

The tightness I have felt in these later works is perhaps due to the realist direction they have taken. In painting these later works I have, unconsciously or perhaps instinctually, balanced the loose haze of the pictorial space with sharper and more solidly rendered objects. And while I consider them to be successful paintings in their own right, importantly, their contribution to this research is a renewed focus, on my part, on the gesture of paint and painting, and its potential ability to reflect that of everyday lived experience. Throughout this project, it has been of great interest and importance to me to combine moments of specificity with ones of gesture and abstraction—in which the illusion of the painted scene threatens to fall apart and its mode of construction becomes visible. This research is as much about painting, and painting's ability to reflect lived experience, as it is about the other theoretical concerns I have engaged with here, and to that end I want the works to exhibit the

gestural and bodily nature of this kind of artistic practice, and in so doing reflect and draw parallels with the gestural and bodily nature of the everyday.

Figure 6.9 Mardi Crocker, *Perfect Whip*, 2017. Photograph by Bo Wong.

Figure 6.10 Mardi Crocker, *QV*, 2017. Photograph by Bo Wong.

In the time after the exhibition, reflecting on the work and thinking more about Rae and Morandi, and coming to greater insights about how their work related to this project, I returned to the painting I exhibited at Applecross Art Space (Figure 6.5). With the benefit of distance, of time away from it, and the progression of this research and my thinking, I was able to see it anew, or in a different light. I found areas of painterly ambiguity met those of specificity, so that moments of realist representation fell apart at the edges, dissipated into mark making and gesture—allowing both the representation of an object and space, and the suggestion that things were not solid and static but were vibrating and live, movable and belonging more to the realm of sensation and affect.

Figure 6.11 Mardi Crocker, *thank you* (detail), 2016. Photograph by the artist.

There is a washy indeterminacy that occurs in the moment where the bottle meets the surface of the benchtop, and the shadowy area behind the bottle—constructed of the same marks and transparent paint that construct parts of the bottle itself—acts to both conjure ideas of shadows and reflections, but also to create a kind of seeping-out of the bottle's physicality and materiality. These are areas in which object and space

coalesce, boundaries are blurred and reality wobbles, if only for a moment. These kinds of painterly moments, moments of hazy indeterminacy and vibration are the ones in which the sensations and affects this research is concerned with can come to the fore. *Aesop* and *Two Sukins*, discussed in the next chapter, are paintings made during this time of reflection, with a view to loosening my grip and allowing the texture and the gesture of the everyday, and painting, to come into greater focus.

Chapter Seven: A Gap and a Breathing Space

In the *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction* (2015), author Matthew Crawford writes, 'we are living through a crisis of attention that is now widely remarked upon, usually in the context of some complaint or other about technology' (Crawford 2015, ix). According to Crawford, living in the modern age means contending with distraction 'which is usually discussed as a problem of technology,' however, he suggests viewing the problem 'as more fundamentally one of political economy: in a culture saturated with technologies for appropriating our attention, our interior mental lives are laid bare as a resource to be harvested by others' (Crawford 2015, 247). He argues that in viewing it as such, we can shift 'our gaze from the technology itself to the intention that guides its design and its dissemination into every area of life' (Crawford 2015, 247). This crisis of attention is not engendered by the presence of advancing technologies alone, but is rather the result of cultural forces, and political and economic systems that orient them in the direction of our attentional faculties. The larger problem, or question that Crawford poses, is how might we 'maintain a coherent self' and lead happy and fulfilling lives in the face of such pervasive and intrusive forces (Crawford 2015, 247).

For Crawford, the answer to this problem entails a re-consideration of the way we encounter and relate to the world. What Crawford means by 'coherent self' is 'a self that is able to act according to settled purposes and ongoing projects, rather than flitting about' (Crawford 2015, ix). This would be the antithesis of a self plagued by exterior forces vying for and absorbing his or her attention, and so moderating his or her decisions and actions. Instead, this person practices autonomous thought and decision making, successfully suppressing the myriad pressures of the highly engineered 'attentional landscape' (Crawford 2015, 21). It would seem, then, that the capacity to ignore things would form a large part of the model of a successfully coherent self: 'an ability to ignore things would seem to remain important to the lifelong task of carving out and maintaining a space for rational agency for oneself, against the flux of environmental stimuli' (Crawford 2015, 21). Crawford goes on, however, to caution against this rationalist position, as he calls it, referencing research

in the fields of behavioural economics and neuroethics in which this idea of rational agency and decision making is challenged: 'Whatever reason-giving we engage in tends to be a post hoc story that we tell ourselves, and is therefore beside the point if we are trying to understand human behaviour' (Crawford 2015, 22). Crawford instead calls for a position that considers the situated self, asking: 'What if the coherence of a life is in some significant way a function of *culture*? What if we are situated among our fellows in norms and practices that shape a life? In that case culture matters. That is, the environment matters' (Crawford 2015, 23). Here he builds a case for a position in which everyday activities and engagement with our environment can be seen as contributing to the creation of the self rather than compromising it.

Crawford contends that through skilled activities we can 'establish narrow and highly structured patterns of attention—what I shall be calling *ecologies of attention*—that can give coherence to our mental lives, however briefly' (Crawford 2015, 23). Skilled activities and practices present moments in which the self can make decisions that are related to, but importantly, not wholly influenced or derailed by, objects and people that surround him or her: 'In such an ecology, the perception of a skilled practitioner is "tuned" to the features of the environment that are pertinent to effective action; extraneous information is dampened and irrelevant courses of action disappear' (Crawford 2015, 23). The skilled activities Crawford has in mind range from the act of cooking dinner for a large party, to the operating of a motorcycle and the crafting of a pipe organ, and what they offer the reader are examples of 'what it would look like to inhabit an ecology of attention that puts one squarely *in* the world' (Crawford 2015, 246). To my mind the end goal in Crawford's work, the coherent and situated self who lives a happy and fulfilling life, necessitates an immersion in the world through activities and practices that both assert individuality and agency, and exhibit a receptiveness to culture and environment—the people and objects that surround us. In the highly engineered and palatable attentional landscape modern living finds us in we can, and should, find ways, activities and practices, with which to act upon and situate ourselves within the world.

The purpose of my research, however, is not to rehabilitate the self, or advocate the taking-up of skilled practices in order to effect a re-joining of self and world. I feel as though I want to rewind a little here, and consider that we are already situated in the world, by virtue of our physical presence, and perhaps we need not buck against the forces of distraction, but rather take a gentler approach, feeling for the forces and affects that are present in those times of distraction. In an earlier chapter I discussed Crawford's work alongside that of anthropologist Daniel Miller in advocating for a theoretical approach that does not pit the self against the world but rather describes an approach in which the self and body are situated in the world, joined to it. This led me to the discussion of the theories of new materialism and the suggestion of dismantling the subject-object divide, which I found to align with the works of both theorists. Both note the importance of culture and environment in the creation of the self, and describe methods with which to attune to the outside world. Where my own thinking diverges from Crawford's and shares more with that of Daniel Miller, and also Kathleen Stewart and Maria Cichosz, is how I imagine this attunement can take place. Stewart undertakes what she describes as 'an experiment, not a judgement' (Stewart 2007, 1), and similarly, Cichosz asks us to suspend judgement and the impulse to categorize and define in order to feel for affects; 'attentiveness requires us simply to be *aware* that something is happening' (Cichosz 2014, 57). While this research allows for Crawford's 'flitting about' and the distraction of environmental stimuli, it doesn't categorise these states as 'less-than' in the continuum of lived experience. Rather, it suggests that attention and attentiveness can take the form of openness and a generous attitude toward everyday moments, which could certainly be characterised as distracted, and the feelings and affects they generate.

Michael Sheringham's concept of the 'project of attention' was an integral notion to the genesis of this research project. In *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Sheringham states that 'the everyday exists through the practices that constitute it, the ways in which times and spaces are appropriated by human subjects and converted into physical traces, narratives, and histories' (Sheringham 2013, 386). A project is an ideal method with which to attend to the everyday because:

> To outline a project is not so much to focus on an achievement as to invoke, on the one hand an idea; a mental postulation, and on the other hand a range of actions conducive—in theory—to its realisation. A project—a commitment to midterm actions—implies a preoccupation with the domain of practice. (Sheringham 2013, 388)

I find Sheringham's conception of the project to echo Kathleen Stewart's own summation of her efforts in writing *Ordinary Affects*, 'an experiment, not a judgement' (Stewart 2007, 1), and to my mind Stewart has undertaken her own project of attention in writing it. Sheringham states:

> In the sphere of everyday life, the project 'allows for' everydayness by suspending abstract definition and creating a breathing space, a gap or hiatus that enables the *quotidien* to be apprehended as a medium in which we are immersed rather than a category to be analysed. (Sheringham 2013, 390)

Maria Cichosz's notion of the trip as a mode of being and experiencing might also be considered a project of attention—or at least shares an ethos with the understanding of it that I am building here. I adopted Sheringham's notion of the project of attention as a kind of loose methodology with which to conduct this research. I wanted to effect an immersion in the everyday through the practice of painting, and so did not set out with a solid achievement in mind, but rather wanted to effect a commitment to the everyday, a generous and open attitude to the moments that constitute it and the affects it generates. I have situated my research in the bathroom, have paid particular attention to the everyday, bodily experience of it and as such have conducted my own project of attention.

In this way the results of my research, and its significance to the field of artistic practice and research, do not exist as conclusions reached, but rather as an example of a way of working, and a way of thinking and attending—creatively—to a dimension of life that is overlooked. Sheringham writes of the project as creating a gap, a breathing space, and I'm reminded of the breathing space I wrote about in earlier

chapters, a coincidence that I think holds some significance. Though it seems a small claim to make, in concluding three years of research and making, it is one I feel most comfortable and genuine in making; that this research gave me space to breathe and also offers that to the reader, and viewer of the painted works. It offers a small hiatus, gives encouragement and permission to take it, and gestures toward the potential of doing so, the affects that can be found and felt in such a 'space' and the gentle intimation that similar gaps and spaces can be found and enacted in other areas of life.

In drawing to a close I have come to realise that this research, amongst its offerings, is also asking something of us, as viewers, readers and artists. I have created 'small' paintings in conducting this research project, and in the previous paragraph I made a 'small' claim and described a 'small' hiatus, however it is not my intention, in doing so, to encourage the usual connotation of insignificance that smallness as a description might usually conjure, and so I have come to the realisation that this research is asking for a reconsideration and recalibration of our sense of 'small.' In the previous chapter I discussed the 'small' works of other contemporary painters, and suggested that small might also be understood as meaning local, and intimate—these are not inherently unimportant themes or experiences, and so are not small in that sense, they are simply ones that find themselves on the smaller end of a scale that reaches from singular self to big wide world. As such, small could also be understood as a matter of proximity, of closeness to the self and body.

In Chapter 2 I discussed Bryson's notion of 'worldly vision' and the culturally determined hierarchy of things, in which we pay attention to the world's show and overlook the small stuff of still life painting, our sidekicks, the objects that inhabit our immediate surrounds and bodily orbit. The objects of still life painting and the everyday are the close and small, and in the hierarchies of both western art and culture they are the less significant. However, as subsequent chapters have shown, I believe these hierarchies should not be so readily accepted, and have built an argument that allows the small stuff of everyday life a position of importance in the development of culture and everyday existence. In doing so I don't negate the 'smallness' of the things I have been attending to with this research, but rather, contend that small is not any

less impactful, significant or worthy of attention, it perhaps just takes a second glance, a deliberate act of noticing and re-thinking to discover its import and potential. And so, writing of the breathing space, the small hiatus, that this research offers, I am not understating my work, but using an idea native to the realm and ethos of the research to describe, in a gentle way, the potential paying attention, to both it and the experiences it conjures, holds.

This brings me back to Maria Cichosz's work 'The Potential of Paying Attention: Tripping and the Ethics of Affective Attentiveness,' and to a consideration of the ethical potential paying attention to the everyday holds. Cichosz writes: 'I want to emphasize that I see attentiveness here not in a grand, nebulous sense, but as rooted in the ordinary, where small undulations of potential reside, hidden' (Cichosz 2014, 58). And for Cichosz, this potential is an ethical one: 'Through an ethical attentiveness to the mundane, we see that the world is in a state of constant dynamic change, no matter how minute, and through this recognition it is possible to imagine how things might be different than they currently are' (Cichosz 2014, 58). For Cichosz the habitual nature of the everyday and its pattern of inattention leads to 'a lack of attunedness that prompts us to carelessly or unconsciously choose the calming alternative of directing this potential-laden impulse into something familiar, closed and easily-defined' (Cichosz 2014, 58). The affects and impulses that the everyday offers or generates are lost to our culturally conditioned and habituated modes of seeing and being in the world, and it is Cichosz's contention that by enacting a shift in our attention we can become more aware of, and so reevaluate the ways in which we relate to the world, and in so doing harness the potential of everyday affects and moments to foster change.

Cichosz finds that the structures of power that influence and shape our world are felt at an everyday level, and in attuning to the everyday we are able to detect the 'minute, moment to moment functioning without which the totalised systems that often become isolated objects of analysis could not exist' (Cichosz, 2014, 58). She writes:

> Totalizing shorthand terms like 'neoliberalism', 'advanced capitalism' and 'globalisation' explain only macro-level, systemic aspects of power structures while ignoring the paradoxical fact that these larger systems, though they appear fixed, concrete and immutable, are actually composed of vague sensations present in the everyday. Disregarding these undefined intensities that seem gone almost as soon as they are felt results in a view of power as something that has already happened, rather than as a number of immanent forces constantly assembling and reassembling, coming together. (Cichosz 2014, 58)

By being attentive to the affects of the everyday one can become aware of the ways in which structures of power influence and are a part of daily life and modes of being, as well as one's own potential agency within those structures.

Towards the end of her paper Maria Cichosz suggests that the trip, as a methodological framework with which to attend to the affects of the everyday, can be found in other forms of experience:

> Tripping is a method, not an end in itself, and trips, as intense, unexpected affectively-mediated psychic experiences, can take many forms: reading a really great book that forces one to slow down; meditating; running until awareness is narrowed to such particulars as breathing, pace, and sound; looking at a piece of art. (Cichosz 2014, 62)

In his paper "Beholding and Being Beheld: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and the Ethics of Attention" (2015), distinguished professor of Ethics and Society Mark Freeman quotes George Steiner as finding a similar experience through music, suggesting that it 'puts us in felt relation to the energy that is life; it puts us in a relation of experienced immediacy with the abstractly and verbally inexpressible but wholly palpable, primary fact of being' (Steiner in Freeman 2015, 171). Freeman goes on to quote Steiner as suggesting that 'this energy of existence lies deeper than any biological or psycho-logical determination' and that it 'mocks analytic rationalization' and 'rebukes the arrogance of positivism, of the demand for a quantifiable, for a psychologically evidential or sociologically mapped explanation of things' (Steiner in

Freeman 2015, 171). This resonates with Cichosz's understanding of affect, and that it does and should be allowed to exist before and outside of analytical thought and reasoning. For Freeman and Steiner this experience serves to approach a sensation of 'otherness,' in which the ego's rule is temporarily suspended and the real world, the experience of it, is able to come to the fore, and Freeman uses Steiner's thinking in support of the development of his own 'ethics of attention.'

Referencing the writing of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch as well as Steiner, Freeman builds a case for a kind of 'model,' as he terms it, in which we learn to consider the 'other' by both beholding it and being beheld, made possible through a detachment from and effacement of one's own ego:

> Beholding the Other thus requires what Murdoch calls 'unselfing', divesting oneself of ego and thereby letting the world emerge. One path of unselfing is through developing one's powers of attention. Along these lines it might be said that sharpening and developing one's powers of attention is a prerequisite for beholding the Other… Another path of unselfing… is through encountering those 'objects', both human and nonhuman, that can serve to disrupt and displace one's own egocentric energies. Taken together, these two paths—beholding and being beheld—lead in the direction of an ethics of attention'. (Freeman 2015, 160)

This unselfing and the consideration of the world and the 'Other' that it makes possible become ethical considerations because, he writes, 'insofar as this detachment results in drawing one nearer to reality, it creates the possibility for this reality providing a greater measure of mean-ing and nourishment than it had before' (Freeman 2015, 171). Like Cichosz, Freeman finds attention, and the act of paying attention, to hold significant possibilities for everyday life, ultimately suggesting that an ethical employment of attention can result in 'a kind of reselfing, such that a larger, more capacious mode of being—let us call it a Self—emerges. This Self will be unbounded and will know and feel its kinship with the world' (Freeman 2015, 172), The commonalities I find in both theorist's work serve to support the idea that attention to the "Other" (including the nonhuman) and the affects felt through such attention can reflect and elucidate one's experience of the world and the ways in

which we relate to it. Their methods of attunement, Cichosz's 'trip' and Freeman's 'unselfing,' can take us out of egocentric and habituated modes of being, if only momentarily, to allow a breathing space and a gap in which other sensations, possibilities and modes of being are able to arise.

In concluding her paper, Cichosz quotes prominent American author and essayist David Foster Wallace, who writes:

> [The] so-called 'real-world' will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called 'real-world' of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self, (Wallace in Cichosz 2014, 62)

Which, according to Cichosz, 'are the products of inscribed habits of inattention' (Chichosz 2014, 62). Cichosz argues that in this context of modern life, 'signposts, or methodological frameworks highlighting the value of attention are precisely what we need' because such 'conceptual tools' provide 'a concrete starting point from which we can imagine that through the circulation of affect's immanent potential, the world is always qualitatively changing' and 'frameworks that point out the importance of attentiveness involve us in this change on a moment to moment basis in a way that is both impossibly simple and incredibly profound' (Cichosz 2014, 62).

The ethical potential of paying attention is varied and wide-reaching, encompassing power-relations and politics as well as the inner life, and the pursuit of moral relations with the world and its inhabitants. In discussing Cichosz's and Freeman's arguments I have intended not to explicitly attach to this research the political and spiritual potential for change they describe, but rather, to provide evidence that a project of attention, such as this research, is a timely and significant project to undertake. The work of Cichosz and Freeman serves to validate the study of the everyday and its objects and affects as having immense potential and significance to modern life; paying attention to the Other, and to the affects of the everyday, offers the attendee opportunities for change, and the agency to bring about this change.

There are periods in my life in which things seem to march on despite me; time, days, work, life in general drives and pushes forward, despite my best efforts to effect a pause or to slow down just long enough to take my bearings, catch my breath. Maybe this is a symptom of the highly engineered attentional landscape Crawford finds modern life to inhabit. The sensation is one of there being too much, and everything happening all at once, so that there is always something I have missed and will miss out on. Maybe, however, this is just a symptom of life itself, of being a self-aware creature that experiences time and holds the knowledge that theirs is finite. Whatever the case, and in light of my discussion of Cichosz's and Freeman's work earlier, if I consider my experience of life to not be ideal, or different than I'd like it to be, I ask myself, 'what is it that I want to change?' The answer is probably 'nothing,' or, there is no concrete answer that I can come up with. What I want to change is not some solid thing *in* my life, but rather the experience of it, the way I *feel* it. This gets to the crux of what I take from the works of Cichosz, Freeman, Sheringham and Stewart, and also elucidates a wider aim and significance of this research.

A project of attention, and paying attention to the everyday, encourages a feeling out of everyday life. Feeling for its affects, the threads of memories it pulls on and brings back into focus, the traces it leaves on the body, the forces it exerts on it, the way the body moves in the moment to moment living of it, and the ways in which our eyes do and don't see it. If, for Cichosz and Freeman, the ultimate significance of attending to the other and the everyday, the previously ignored or overlooked, is the potential for change, the change my research offers and encourages is a newly generous attitude to the lived experience of the everyday, in which moments of distracted action and hazy vision are not the antithesis of a good life or real life, but are the moments, the small hiatuses in the endless progression of 'real life,' in which lived experience and our very mode of insertion in the world can be felt. What we do with these feelings, and how we bring them to bear on, and allow them to inform other areas of life, or indeed inform the very way we connect to and feel situated in life and the world, becomes a matter of personal choice and individual proclivity, what matters most now, today, as Cichosz suggests, is that we find frameworks, signposts and modes of being in which

those feelings can become apparent, and their possibilities subsequently available. Earlier Cichosz listed looking at a piece of art as one such framework, and the creative components of this research, the paintings, have aimed to create those kinds of experiences; moments in which the feel of the everyday and its affects can come into view.

In *The Pilgrim's Bowl (Giorgio Morandi)* (2015), Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet writes of Morandi:

> Some critics have noticed that the painter liked to let a thin layer of dust fall on the objects in his still lifes, when he did not purposely do so himself—was this like a layer of time that would protect them and make them denser? ...To my mind comes the puerile image of a 'sandman' whose duty is to calm down, to put to sleep. I even think of 'Sleeping beauty', of the *Belle au bois dormant*, as could be called the unchanging light bathing Morandi's paintings—it never sparkles or glares, never flashes or breaks through clouds, even if it is as clear as dawn, with subtle rose and grey hues, this light is always strangely tranquil. (Jaccottet 2015, 30)

There is a thin layer of haze or smoke or steam that inhabits my paintings. It collects in corners, clings densely together to form shadows, and then, in other areas disperses, as if under the pressure of light. This pressure seems to come from both without and within though, as light falls on the surface of things but seems also to come from within them, so that hazy brush-marks seem to be acting to gently obscure it, as if it's passing through a sieve of suspended particles of paint. It's a quiet and gentle passing though; light filters effortlessly in and out like exhalations on a crisp morning, and the resulting fog of paint feels as if, like dust, it could be blown or wiped away with an easy gesture. In this way the light in my paintings is tranquil too, and aims to calm down, to slow down. The evident brush marks speak of texture and sensation, of the vibration of light, in a still but somehow moving scene, but because they are so muted, so thinly applied, they act more as thin veils than assertive etchings out of space, and they speak of texture and sensation in a dreamlike way, pulling on the threads of memories of experiences past.

Figure 7.1 Mardi Crocker, *Two Sukins*, 2017. Photograph by the artist

The objects that stand amongst these steamy memory-scapes, allowing the fog to settle on and around them, then act as quiet monuments; monuments to moments and memories of similar shape and texture and feel. Their solid parts feel like small anchor points to slide onto and around, to grip and squeeze, push and release, recalling memories of doing so with other like objects, before they once again recede into the realm of the overlooked, blanketed by a veil of steam which speaks as much

of the environment they inhabit, the bathroom, as it does of the distracted glances they are offered, the way in which they are habitually seen but not seen.

Figure 7.2 Mardi Crocker, *Aesop*, 2017. Photograph by the artist

The final paintings created as part of this research have aimed to reflect and respond to the theoretical ideas and concerns explored within this research and the creative components that have come before them. The body of work as a whole traces the

development of this research, and I see the final works as being the most successfully reflective of my thinking as I conclude this project. This research has endeavoured to examine and utilise the traditions of the genre of still life painting in attempts to both reflect the lived experience of the everyday and also to elucidate the ability of the genre to contribute meaningfully to contemporary painting practice and discourse. In Chapter 2, I drew from Norman Bryson's writing on the genre in detecting a parallel between the content of still life and the genre itself as being overlooked and sidelined, in accordance with a culturally determined hierarchy of value. In the catalogue essay for *An Empire of Things*[1], an exhibition held in early 2018 at Grace Cossington Smith Gallery in Abbotsleigh, NSW, Dr Jaime Tsai writes: 'Despite the ongoing popularity of still life, the genre has been denigrated historically as trivial, base, and unworthy of critical attention' (Tsai 2018, n.p.). However, with reference to the exhibition *An Empire of Things*:

> The incredible variety of still life practices on display demonstrates the continuing relevance and power of a genre that was once considered frivolous. Through still life, the banal rituals and trappings of everyday life are put on show within the 'higher' discourses of culture, and we are asked to slow down the way we look, and re-evaluate the familiar in a new, critical light. (Tsai 2018, n.p.)

Jude Rae is one of the artists represented in *An Empire of Things*, described in promotional material as an exhibition responding to the object, and in the 2017 essay *In Plain Sight* she writes, similarly, of looking:

> Vision doesn't just happen, we learn how and what we see. Once the optic nerve fires the grey matter kicks in, deciding what is worthy of attention and what not. Our ability to see is, of necessity, embedded in daily life to the point of unconsciousness. Mostly, we see what we expect to see. Even in moments of reflective

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[1] *An Empire of Things: An Exhibition Responding To the Object*, featuring works by Tony Albert, Tom Carment, Vivian Cooper Smith, Phil Drummond, Sarah Goffman, Harley Ives, Nigel Milsom, Margaret Olley, Margaret Preston, Jude Rae, Anthony Springford, Robyn Stacey, Ken + Julia Yonetani. Curated by Lisa Jones and Mary Faith, Exhibited at Grace Cossington Smith Gallery, Abbotsleigh, NSW, April 19 – May 26 2018.

> awareness, when we consciously describe the world to ourselves, the descriptions are schematic and fugitive. One of the characteristics of great art is that it can disrupt this shorthand, subtly resetting our relationship to the world and ourselves by prompting us to recognise, question, or reconsider aspects of our sensory life… A painting can recall not only the look of things, but also the feel of that seeing. It reminds us that vision is primary because it is not just visual. The eye brings together a complex interweaving of the senses so that vision registers as both spatial and tactile. (Rae 2017, n.p.)

'The feel of that seeing' is a phrase that resonates with me, is one I wish I had written, discovered, myself. It feels native to my thinking, to this research, and to my painting practice, and so is perhaps a fitting place to end this document. 'Why painting?' and 'Why a PhD?' are questions that have swirled, swooped and landed on me more times than I care to remember. But here Rae comforts me, plots out, with her words, a little patch of painting territory I feel I am allowed to tread in, to claim my own stake in. It's a comfort because her words have validated my own, have validated the aims of my painting practice and this project, the conducting of which has been fraught with self-doubt and moments of worry and tentativeness. I imagine all creative practitioners feel these moments of doubt and unworthiness, to make something and put it out in to the world is to risk failure—it's a certain form of self-exposure with no built-in shield or safety net. And so, the final form of significance this project embodies is one of a personal nature, but which may resonate with other practitioners: it has encouraged and necessitated a consideration of my own work alongside peers and more established artists and thinkers whose works I admire. It has forced me to make claims for myself, for my work, and to allow it an importance in the context of contemporary art and painting. And finally, it has shown me that the sensitive, intimate and small, the overlooked, are worthy of attention.

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Chapter Six: Within Touching Distance

Figure 6.7 Jude Rae *SL374*, 2017, oil on linen, 615mm x 565mm. Accessed July 13, 2018 https://www.juderae.com/still-life/f6zvixi4ucxyhong9lk56rcxedk2em

Figure 6.8 Mardi Crocker, *Bathox*, 2017, oil on board, 40.5 x 30.5 cm. Photograph by Bo Wong.

Figure 6.9 Mardi Crocker, *Perfect Whip*, 2017, oil on board, 61 x 45.5 cm. Photograph by Bo Wong.

Figure 6.10 Mardi Crocker, *QV*, 2017, oil on board, 61 x 45.5 cm. Photograph by Bo Wong.

Figure 6.11 Mardi Crocker, *thank you* (detail), 2016, oil on board, 40 x 30 cm. Photograph by the artist.

Chapter Seven: A Gap and a Breathing Space

Figure 7.1 Mardi Crocker, *Two Sukins*, 2017, oil on board, 30.5 x 22.5 cm. Photograph by the artist

Figure 7.2 Mardi Crocker, *Aesop*, 2017, oil on board, 30.5 x 22.5 cm. Photograph by the artist

Appendix

This section contains the catalogue for the exhibition *Within Touching Distance*, discussed in this thesis, as well as materials which have not been directly discussed, but which bear a relationship to, and were written or took place during the course of this research. Permission to reprint them in full here has been sought from the authors and places of publication.

The following article is a review of the 2016 exhibition Loyalty to the Thing, written by Graham Mathwin and published in Issue 2, July 2016, of the Perth arts blog Sensible Perth *https://sensibleperth.com/2016-2/issue-2-july-2016/review-mardi-crocker-loyalty-to-the-thing-free-range/*

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Review: Mardi Crocker: *Loyalty to the Thing:* Free Range Gallery
Graham Mathwin

The bathroom is a paradoxical place, a reflective and glossy room that is the site of our more abject expulsions. The clean white or beige tiles and glass give the appearance of a façade, behind which hides the system to which all its orifices direct themselves. Sewerage, as Phillipe Parreno says, is how people have 'rationalised their relationship to their waste' (Parreno, Ulrich Obrist. 2008)and it has resulted in people redesigned cities according to plumbing needs [*sic*]. It is, however, the very form of the bathroom that preoccupies Mardi Crocker in *Loyalty to the Thing*—particularly the bottles and plastic packaging that inhabit it.

Roland Barthes, in Mythologies insists on plastic as a 'disgraced material' in the 'hierarchy of major poetic substances', its 'hollow and flat' sound 'best reveals it for what it is' (Barthes, 1993). It is malleable, dissolving with heat and its absence of character allowing it to be formed in any manner, and. Vacuum cast into various shapes and figures. Yet this is the world we inhabit. Our being is itself moulded by plastics, or has plastics moulded around it ('we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas' (Barthes, 1993). But something else: René Descartes wax argument: That the only essential characteristic of bodies is their extension. That the mutability of things is the basis of their essence; unlike Barthes' simple undermining of its character, plastic is, like wax, a soundless material (and one that fluctuates more readily than his own devotion to his certainties). Yet we know that even metal and glass melt. It is what makes them useful. Even Barthes acknowledges plastic's quality:

'more than a substance, plastic is the idea of its infinite transformation' (Barthes, 1993). His denigration is unwarranted.

If I can draw a long bow: what is paint if not unformed earth? Does it not have the quality of transformation too (at least until set into its final form)? It has a character, but the character that is most conducive is its character of not yet being fixed—of its ability to become something else. There is a reciprocation between these things: That there is a constancy to the material of formlessness between plastic and paint, that yet finally fix themselves into rounded, shaped containers. What is it that these containers thus presented hold? They give the impression of being empty, holding nothing but themselves.

Robert Irwin, in *Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees* mentions an experience that is similar to looking at Crocker's work. He talks about the abstract expressionist obsession with 'power' and how to get power from a work—something that normally involves a great deal of scale—he then recalls an experience where he went to an art gallery, and was blown away, not by a grand large-scale painting, but by a small painting he saw in the corner: a Phillip Guston. The same words could be employed when looking at Crocker's work: it is similarly diminutive in scale yet powerfully attractive. As many gaps as you can find within them, it is unimportant to their incredible qualities. Why her show was a one-night-only, and her focus on form to the elision of other pertinent issues surrounding our intimate domestic spaces remain unanswered, and perhaps never will be. One can imagine, like Giorgio Morandi, that Crocker could paint the same set of plastic tubs for the rest of her life, and still find something incredible in them.

Along with Morandi, the other most visible lineage of Crocker's work is Vija Celmins (who was a pupil of Robert Irwin's at one stage)—Morandi's choice of subject appears most related to Crocker's inquiry, but Celmins is perhaps closer to the less quantitative and more qualitative examination that Crocker puts forward of these objects. Morandi's work sometimes seems to be merely using the cups and bowls and jugs as placeholders for something else—in his case, paint. Crocker and Celmins

however, share an interest in the nature of poetic things—Celmins of photographs, Crocker of objects and the domestic space of the bathroom. Though they claelry [*sic*] have wildly divergent styles, Celmins and Crocker both share a certain sensitivity for the minutiae of the banal.

There is something in her work that is absent however—it is the branding and labelling that typically covers the objects of a bathroom. What does this elision mean? It clearly presents the focus as being one of form rather than the particularities of popular culture and advertising. What are the operations of something like this? It seems like a denial of the commercial in favour of the forms it has created. If Crocker's practice looks into the overlooked, why does it in turn overlook what is an undeniable part of the object? Is it too loud? Is the branding too much an obvious part of the thing? Do we not live in a world that people are advertised to—and this is not a world with Nivea and Dove imprinted onto the bars of soap in our bathrooms? Despite this gap, the work none-the-less impresses deeply with its use of paint, its qualities, and its dedication to the most mundane of things.

Barthes, Roland. 1993. Mythologies. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage.

Descartes, René. 1960. Meditations on first philosophy. Translated by Lawrence J. Lafleur. Indianapolis, Ind : Bobbs-Merrill.

Irwin, Robert; Weschler, Lawrence. c2008. Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees: over 30 years of conversations. Berkley: University of California Press.

Parreno, Phillipe; Ulrich Obrist, Hans. 2008. The conversation series: Phillipe Parreno, Hans Ulrich Obrist. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

The following article is a review of Perth artist Tom Freeman's exhibition Small Time, written by myself and published in Issue 8, February 2017, of the Perth arts blog Sensible Perth.
https://sensibleperth.com/2017-2/issue-8-february/review-tom-freeman-small-time-paper-mountain/

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Review: Tom Freeman: *Small Time:* Paper Mountain
Mardi Crocker

Tom Freeman's Small Time, exhibited at Paper Mountain, is a collection of works, accrued over years of making, that are imbued with an infectious generosity toward everyday life and time and the act of making itself. A gentle cacophony of hand sculpted and assembled objects and delicately painted works on paper, most no bigger than an outstretched hand, perch on the railing that runs the length of Paper Mountain's gallery, on the purpose made tables that run down the centre of the room or on the hand-made shelves or hanging apparatuses on the facing wall. And although it is tempting to read these works, arranged as they are in a linear fashion, as tracing some kind of narrative or evolution, the effect of the whole instead leads me to encounter Small Time as a kind of collected monument to everyday life and time spent making, and to enter the gallery and encounter each one individually is to encounter a pocket of time, small time, everyday time, made material.

Time, as the title of the exhibition suggests, is a key consideration, or perhaps component of this show, and as I move from one work to the next I find a measured progression, and an egalitarian dispersement of attention (time spent), and I think, affection, so that there is a steady ebb, from one work to the next, that speaks of the experience of the 'time' of everyday life. According to theorist Rita Felski, the everyday as a term "conveys the fact of repetition" and this repetition is born out of "diurnal rhythms that are in turn embedded within larger cycles of repetition: the weekend, the annual holiday…" so that an essential trait of the everyday is its cyclical

nature. For many early theorists of the everyday this cyclical nature was a deadening force, a closed-loop of habitualized time, to be broken free of in the pursuit of progress, time in a linear form. However, Felski suggests: "the passing of time surely cannot be grasped in such rigidly dualistic terms. Thus acts of innovation and creativity are not opposed to, but rather made possible by, the mundane cycles of the quotidian."

Considering Freeman's works, arranged as they are, I think of the rhythms of everyday life, and consider that it's his immersion in the time of everyday life that have brought these things to fruition. By allowing one day spent in the studio to inform another, allowing generative echoes and reverberations (visible in the works) to pass through them, he embraces both the cyclical nature of everyday life and time, and the possibilities it affords. As each day arrives and takes its place alongside the last, and is followed by another, they form a steady and reliable repetition, a comfortable vantage point from which smaller moments and details can be attended to. This is what I understand Freeman's Small Time to be, or where I imagine it to be found, in the small moments provided by daily time.

In this way Small Time finds Freeman extending a spirit of generosity and receptivity not only to daily time, but also to the content of everyday life, as well as the act of making. Just as he allows the most rudimentary, craft-like of materials, things like cardboard, diamantes or glitter, to mingle with those we more readily associate with high art, he allows his everyday life to fold into the studio, and find its outlet in the works that subsequently leave it. Life is not put on hold in the face of making, not suspended or left at the door so that an artistic practice might exist, but rather the two coalesce, the moments and pace of everyday life feed into the works, and the works in turn memorialise them, lending them a material form. This form, I believe, is not descriptive so much as intuitive, and is perhaps led as much by an enthusiasm for materials, or the discovery of relationships between them, as it is by a moment, or the look, feel or sound of one, that might have lodged in Freeman's mind that day. In this way each work; a clay object, a delicate painting or a playful mélange of materials, can

be seen as both an embodiment of a lived moment and an expression of the artist's enthusiasm in translating it materially.

Embodiment is perhaps a fitting idea to conclude with here. So many of the works bear Freeman's fingerprints, not to the detriment of the finished product, but as evidence of the lived body, of the real life and time poured into them. As I find the shape of his palm replicated in clay, or read the mechanics of a work's construction, available to the viewer rather than polished into invisibility, I am once more reminded of, or transported to, small moments, pockets of time, that are available in the everyday and have been grasped, attended to and made material, and so visible, by Freeman. As such, Freeman's Small Time engenders an attitude of attentiveness, and exists as a kind of holistic merging of life and artistic practice that is both a material reflection of Freeman's own daily life, and a gentle invitation to the viewer to re-attune to their own.

Rita Felski, Doing Time : Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture, 2000, New York University Press

The following images show the exhibition catalogue for The Surface of Things, an exhibition I held at The Hive Art Space in 2017, which was developed outside of this research but which shared many of its theoretical concerns and concepts.

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Image Credit: Mardi Crocker, *Lawler*, 2017, oil on board, 12.5 x 17.5 cm

The Surface of Things

Mardi Crocker (1987, Perth)

There's a familiar click, and before that a momentary resistance, a force against the finger, when a switch is flicked. Pushing it from one position to another, passing through the wobbly no-mans land of neither off nor on, before landing, being gently pulled, as if magnetized, into position. When switched on it summons a current that courses through the veins of the building, and finds as its outlet the bulb in the ceiling of the room. This is its function, its use as a thing, and when 'on' the switch itself stands to attention, holding fast its position, and the force it conjures. And then it is turned off, and this function is interrupted, is no longer required and so placed on hiatus.

A non-descript thing, a ubiquitous and so missable interruption in the otherwise smooth surface of the wall, existing out of basic necessity, and reached for and engaged out of distracted need and habit, the switch itself disappears into its function when used. However when not in use, when disengaged, and seemingly disconnected from the invisible network it exists to arouse, the switch can become something else, and the consideration of it can arouse something else. In the interstices between uses, it can appear, and re-appear, as an object self-contained. Momentarily divorced from the thing it does (though the spectre of its job, the possibility of use is never truly avoided or dispersed), its edges and faces, its material make-up can come into view. It can become and possess its own surface, surfaces, and what can be read in these are traces of accumulated time and wear, and reflections of things outside itself entirely.

Mardi Crocker, (1987, Perth) completed a Bachelor of Art (Humanities)(Honours) in 2014 and is a current Phd candidate at Curtin University. Primarily a painter, her artistic practice and current research examine the embodied experience of the everyday through a focus on domestic objects. She has exhibited at Paper Mountain, Free Range Gallery and Applecross Art Space.

The following images show the exhibition catalogue for Within Touching Distance, an exhibition I held at Spectrum Project Space in 2017, and which is discussed in this thesis. It contains the essay "A Matter of Attention" written by Amy Hickman.

A Matter of Attention

Amy Hickman

There's a risk in assuming that painting is always a matter of attention. What follows from this assumption is another, equally risky, one: that painting objects—reproducing them as subjects—is a matter of drawing attention to them, of putting them "on a pedestal," so to speak. It's very easy to monumentalize something. All you have to do is leave it alone, that is, separate it off from its surroundings, lift it up and above whatever goes on around it.

Of course, painting does do this. Painting tends to separate off its subject, giving us, most of the time, a neat sort of division between figure and ground, and, in the gallery, an easy separation between painting and not-painting. It lets us be sure of what we're supposed to look at, even if—as might be said to be the case here—what we're supposed to look at is a series of paintings whose subjects are just ordinary things. We could say that the act of painting ordinary objects turns them into something worthy of attention, but insisting on this as its only function—while it might subvert one hierarchy (of subjects)—lets another pass us by unnoticed. Norman Bryson's Looking at the Overlooked emphasises the former, that is, this hierarchy of subjects within painting and the way that it reaffirms the prestige of the human subject by constructing and maintaining it as "the primary focus of depiction" in a genre that likewise tends to reassert itself as valuable and worthy of attention. [1] It's not that there is, strictly speaking, an absolute hierarchy of images, and painting is at the top. Even if there is such a thing, today something like cinema might occupy the top spot. But painting, both as an object and as a practice, is one that we know to look at, and one that we know precisely how to look at—that is, what we're looking for in it: if not human subjects, then human narratives or traces. As Bryson's title suggests, still life painting, in his view, can be seen to draw out the "overlooked"; things that pass by unnoticed or unseen, because most of the time, they aren't worthy of visual attention.

Within Touching Distance

Mardi Crocker

These things inhabit our bodily orbit, "a half-lit place of blurs and glimpses", where everything is within reach, arranged to be touched and felt for without looking. They are also unremarkable, ubiquitous, and easily and often replaced, and so, are twice overlooked. Despite this they persist, or something of them persists. Traces and remnants, affects; impressions of shape and shadow, of surface and texture, sensory memories are generated and recalled when our bodies meet theirs, or look past them.

By focusing on the ways in which we know these objects through habituated, often automatic handling of them, Crocker explains that the aim of the works is to pair a sensation of familiarity with a newly attentive attitude. These works engage with the traditions of still life painting, investigating contemporary materiality and our engagement with and attitude towards it.

Acknowledgements

Very special thank yous to Claire Bushby and the Spectrum Project Space team and volunteers. My PhD supervisors Dr Ann Schilo and Dr Nicole Slatter, particularly Nicole for very kindly opening the show. To my friends Amy Hickman (for her wonderful words) and to Carla Adams, Jess Day and Kieron Broadhurst for their unwavering support and generosity with this project.

Cover Image: ***Sukin***, 2017, Oil on Board

Exhibition catalogue for Within Touching Distance

QV, 2017, Oil on Board

He's not saying that we don't look at these things (at all, ever), but that the primary qualities of these things resonate in other ways before they fully crystallize into visual objects. The subjects of still life paintings, for Bryson, are far more often the objects of bodily spaces, objects more tactile than visual, things that exist in "half-lit place[s] of blurs and glimpses."[2]

The bathroom, however, is precisely not a half-lit space, but one blazing with light. Western bathrooms in particular, as Jun'ichirō Tanizaki points out, obliterate any and every trace of shadow.[3] The reflective smoothness of every surface—not just mirrors, but tile, ceramics, metal fittings, plastics—makes the bathroom a kind of echo chamber for the body not just visually, but also in terms of sound and tactility. If shadows can be found, they are faint and multiple, or else they are slim lines of pitch dark at the very base of objects. Since light (divine or banal) is precisely revealing or unveiling, this can give the impression of absolute visibility. For one thing, it makes dirt very difficult to hide, and this dichotomy of dirt and cleanliness is, after all, the conceptual locus of the bathroom. But, at the same time, an absence—whether near- or absolute—of shadows can obliterate depth, compressing the space of the bathroom into a single plane, or folding it up even while it seems to expand it. Without perspectival depth, things that might otherwise recede can well up to what it no longer quite makes sense to call a foreground.

In certain images, the air seems to take on some kind of quantity all by itself. What we think of as merely field or background creeps up and distorts or deforms the space of the image and its objects. In Francis Bacon's *Figure at a Washbasin*, the very space of the room twists around a figure, pushing it to violent contortions. This field, if it is one, is not behind the figure (if it is one), but precisely wrapped around it and pressing up against it and up against the very surface of the painting. The twisted figure tries to escape through the drain of the washbasin, the body seemingly trying to force itself out through the smallest of orifices to escape the crushing space around it.[4] The field, precisely by being so bright and flat, isolates the figure absolutely, which we know to be the operation that produces the figurative. And at the same time and in the same motion, this turns out to be completely catastrophic for the figurative mode, since this field is not a background that recedes, but a closed space unto itself that rises to the surface of the painting and deforms both the figure and the relationship between figure and field. Likewise Giorgio Morandi's still lifes, wherein the ground, when it isn't in the way, seems to push itself aside to make room for his objects. At other times it penetrates or obscures his objects, which are often so close together that they form a kind of depthless mass. In Morandi's images, the field is what has been carved out first, leaving empty spaces for objects to occupy: isolating them, but never precisely leaving them alone.[5]

Perfect Whip, 2017, Oil on Board

When we place our focus entirely on the matter of attention, and of what kinds of subjects are worthy of it, what recedes to the background is exactly that: the way that the time and space of painting are assumed to be such that the background is back and the foreground is front. The figurative mode hinges on this assumed depth that pushes figures to the surface as a spectacle for a rapt (if you're lucky) audience. A more apt figure for paintings like these might be the mirror—not to say that images reflect the world—to be more exact, the tain of the mirror. That is, the reflective part that sits behind the glass. In paying it attention, we often find that what we previously saw to be empty air ceases to be just that, and takes on a pressing kind of substance. In works like these, the folded-in space of the bathroom refuses to leave its ostensible subjects alone, and allow them to be fully monumentalized. Nor do these works, finally, turn this hierarchy entirely on its head, giving this space absolute primacy by putting the background on top. Instead, perhaps, the space insists, pressing in on its objects and up against the surface of the image, and never allowing itself to go entirely overlooked.

1. Norman Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 60.

2. Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 64.

3. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, In Praise of Shadows, trans. Thomas J. Harper (Stony Creek, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1977), 3-6.

4. Tomas Geyskens, "Painting as Hysteria—Deleuze on Bacon," in Sexuality and Psychoanalysis: Philosophical Criticisms, eds. Jens De Vleminck & Eran Dorfman (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), 220.

5. Robert Irwin, quoted in Lawrence Weschler, Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 56.